

# DIANE DARCY

THE GHOSTS OF  
CULLODEN  
MOOR<sup>59</sup>



# ALICE

Alice

A Highlander Time Travel Romance (The Ghosts of  
Culloden Moor Book 59)

Diane Darcy

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## A note about the series

Although the individual stories of Culloden's 79 need not be read in strict order, *The Gathering* should definitely be read first to understand what's going on between the Muir Witch and these Highland warriors from 1746. *The Reckoning*, Number 79's story, will finish the series. The names of Culloden's 79 are historically accurate in that we have used only the clan or surnames of those who actually died on that fateful day. The given names have been changed out of respect for those brave men and their descendants. If a ghost happens to share the entire name of a fallen warrior, it is purely accidental.

## Book description

***How do you rescue a damsel in distress ... if she's already dead?***

When Oliver Graham meets a ghost in Lady Maren's garden, it's love at first sight for the young tech billionaire. Because his best friend, Harry, was once a ghost on Culloden Moor, he's well aware souls can sometimes return. When he asks a witch for help, things don't go as planned. Sure, he gets to meet the girl of his dreams, to be her shield and protection, but he doesn't get to choose the location ... or the time ... or anything else, for that matter.

***Her life isn't exactly a bed of roses.***

Alice Munro has caught the eye of Lord Burbidge, and since she's a maid in his manor, and he's married, it's just not going to end well for her. Feeling threatened from more than one corner, she's becoming increasingly desperate, and is running out of options. When Oliver shows up, he's like a spark of light in the darkness. He's smart, kind, gentle, and determined to protect her. He wants to win her heart and take her away from all of this. But to where?

***While she's wondering if she can take a chance, he's determined that, this time, she gets out alive.***

## Prologue

Late spring

If she had to be dead, at least she was in her father's garden.

Alice Munro had tried to console herself with that thought many times over the years. But now hope had entered into her existence and she could hardly contain it, could barely remain in one spot, floating endlessly through the garden paths, passing her beloved roses — just starting to bloom — with barely a glance.

She'd seen another ghost, and he'd returned to life, and the thought of it was exhilarating.

She still couldn't quite grasp the magnitude of it. There were others who'd been given a second chance at life?

The unfairness of her death, her murder, had eaten at her over the centuries. She'd eventually accepted it was done and buried, so to speak. Or rather, she was. She'd never once considered that she might have another opportunity at life.

She tended to fade in and out, and had thought she'd eventually just dissolve into nothingness.

Her beautiful garden had faded in much the same manner, gone to seed, restored, only to overgrow once again. And so, the cycle continued.

Of late, Alice had been much more present as Lady Maren had redone the garden again, giving it new life.

She'd made many a choice Alice disagreed with, but the woman and her workers had been present all the same, giving Alice an exciting glimpse into the world of the living once again.

She glanced around. She'd been murdered here, in a place she'd once been so happy, and sometimes she remembered it as if it only just happened.

She'd watched her killer live his life, but only from a distance, as he'd never set foot in the garden again.

A nearby rosebush caught her attention, the color unique, created by her father to honor her birth.

A familiar bitterness rose within her. Who did her murderer think he was to take her life, her opportunities, her very existence?

If she had another chance, she would grab it with both hands.

The world had changed over the years, slowly at first, then much occurring in the last century alone: clothing, mannerisms, speech,

food. It was fascinating, but she was a specter and the loneliness of the place could be overwhelming at times.

She'd been witness to lovers, children, puppies, and kittens romping within. Birds, butterflies, and deer looking for sustenance. Poets had lazed in this garden with notebook and pen. Young girls wrote novels. Gardeners came and went.

Over the centuries, she'd tried to make all feel welcome, though mayhap that was for selfish reasons. When she had company, she was not alone, though she'd seen gardeners shiver with cold and cross themselves against her when she was nearby.

Still, she took her happiness where she could find it.

At present, Lady Maren came out at least once a day, and Alice had formed quite an attachment to the woman. She didn't seem to mind Alice in the least. They were kindred spirits, but Alice knew from past experience that Lady Maren would soon be gone, as well.

And then there was Harry. A big strong Highlander, with a wildness to him she'd not seen in many a year. Perhaps it was simply the fact that they came from the same time and place, or mayhap it was that he was in love.

Seeing a man like him in love, and loved in return? It had taken a stranglehold on her heart.

What if she was given a second chance at life? What if she could have another chance at love?

He would come back, wouldn't he?

She closed her eyes and tilted her head to absorb the sunshine she could no longer feel upon her face.

If she could have a second chance ...

Emotion built within her and after a long moment, she drew in a nonexistent breath, and screeched. "Let me out of here!"

She didn't know if she was talking to God, or hoping that Harry would hear, but when the birds took flight, exploding from the garden, she felt dreadful for scaring them.

She floated away and, calming herself and the little creatures within her purview, she passed the roses she could no longer smell.

One thing was for certain; if she did get a second chance, just like Harry, she'd not squander it.

## Chapter 1

## Early summer

It wasn't every day that you met a ghost, so surely that could account for the fact that Oliver was having a hard time paying attention to his flesh and blood date.

He took a drink from the glass on the table in front of him, glanced at his date and Daphne opposite, and was glad the music in the club was loud so he could think.

On the day his best friend, Harry, had proposed to Daphne, Oliver had run into a ghost in Lady Maren's garden.

He still couldn't get her out of his head.

He'd questioned Lady Maren in detail about the ghost, and though Lady Maren had never seen her, she'd sworn she'd felt her on many an occasion.

Others had seen her, including Oliver, Harry, and Daphne.

He'd hired someone to research when Alice Munro could have died, and now that he had that information, he'd barely had time to look at it, let alone do anything.

Instead, he'd been dragged to this loud, noisy club, and sat facing yet another blind date.

Not his idea of a good time, especially when he had better things to do.

Like bring a beautiful ghost back to life.

Or rather, arrange to have it done.

According to the file he'd received, Alice Munro had left her village and disappeared on July 6, 1771, and no one had ever heard from her again. A Father Tunstall had recorded the information in the parish ledger. It had to be her. Again, according to the parish records, she'd been twenty-one years old. It was the only entry that made sense.

It had to be her.

Harry bumped Oliver with his elbow, and when he glanced up, the other man gave him a wide-eyed stare, and then glanced pointedly over at Oliver's date.

Subtle, Harry was not.

It was Oliver's third blind date this month.

So far, none had worked out, and even Harry had to agree that many of them seemed to be after Oliver for his money.



Not a great incentive for him to get into a relationship.

Especially since he couldn't seem to get Alice out of his head.

She was blonde, beautiful, and needed his help.

His musings as to why he couldn't meet a girl like her, had quickly turned into how he was going to meet her.

He'd spent some time in the garden, exploring the situation with Lady Maren, but neither of them had caught a glimpse of her since the day she'd appeared to the three of them.

When Harry elbowed him again, this time, Oliver elbowed back.

The girl, his date, was looking out at the dancers with a yearning sort of expression on her face, before finally turning back, and Oliver felt bad.

He'd been raised better than this.

He forced a smile and looked across at the slender, dark-haired woman. She was pretty, with high cheekbones and a full mouth. At one time, he might have been interested. "So, you said you work in some sort of a think tank?" He had to shout to be heard over the pounding music.

Harry and Daphne had figured that since his other dates hadn't worked out, he might go for a smart girl this time.

She nodded. "Not quite," she yelled back. "I work for Givens and Forrester. We're involved in research focused on desalinization."

He looked at her blankly.

"We remove salt from ocean water to make drinkable freshwater."

"Ah. That's a good idea. How do you go about doing that?"

"We used to use reverse osmosis and we'd force seawater through a semipermeable membrane to separate the salt from the water. But we're switching to MOFs."

"Mofs?"

"Metal-organic frameworks. It filters pollutants out of seawater. We can reduce the total dissolved solid from 2000 parts per million to 500 in 30 minutes. We use sunlight and an absorbent-based desalination process."

"Ah. Does your company hold any patents for this process?"

"Yes."

Oliver knew all about patents, and held quite a few of his own. "Any new patents on the horizon?"

She gave him a look. "I am not at liberty to disclose that information."

"Of course, of course," Oliver said. He had his own set of secrets, so he would never begrudge anyone their own.

Still, it left him grasping for another topic.

He glanced at Daphne who was sitting next to ... what was her name? Katherine, or Kayla, or was it Kelsey? He thought it might be

Kelsey.

He was having a hard time caring, when the name floating through his brain was Alice.

He'd never really gone for anyone with blonde hair before, but then, he'd thought he and Daphne would eventually get married, so he hadn't really looked.

He took another swallow of the drink in front of him, wondering how the girl across from him seemed so vague, and the ghost so real.

Someone kicked him under the table, and he barely managed not to say, "Ouch!"

Harry was glaring at him, widening his eyes once more, and expecting him to do something.

He glanced at his date, who was now smiling at Harry, who was sitting stiffly beside him.

See, this was the problem. He never understood what was going on in a social situation. Well, not never, but rarely. It looked to him like his date was flirting with Harry and that Daphne was mad about it, but, of course, he wasn't sure if that's what was going on, and he didn't want to stick his foot in it.

When Daphne gave him a wide-eyed look, he swallowed a bit more of his drink, and then cleared his throat. "I find ocean water to be fascinating," he half yelled, not even filtering the words in his brain before they flew out of his mouth.

Par for the course.

Oh, well. Rich billionaire, here. He could say what he wanted, or at least that's what Harry had told him he was allowed to do.

Now all three of them were looking at him, however, and he could feel his cheeks heating.

"That is to say, when I took biology courses in school, I always found the ones to do with the ocean quite fascinating."

He took another drink and soldiered on. "In point of fact, Harry and I were watching a show recently about sea creatures that live in the deepest part of the ocean. What was that called again, Harry?"

"The Mariana Trench," Harry supplied, his eyes focused on Daphne, who didn't look pleased with him in the least.

If Daphne wasn't pleased, then Harry lost his mind, and Oliver bore the brunt of it.

He was half looking forward to Harry moving out, and half scared that the other man would.

"I would love to visit The Mariana Trench," said what's-her-name. "A host of scientists are going out there and I would love to be part of that adventure."

She started to play with her drink, swirling it one way, and then another. "The only problem is funding." She looked pointedly at

Oliver.

It would be the easiest thing in the world for him to say that he would fund her scientific endeavor. If he knew it would end the date all that much sooner, he'd do it so they could be on their way.

Unfortunately, he knew from past experience that doing such a thing would only extend their relationship, something he had no intention of doing.

As usual, his mind was jumping three steps ahead of itself, and he knew that if he told her that he would fund it, he'd never get rid of her.

They'd have more dates, more interactions, she might even start to get possessive of the relationship.

No, it was easier to simply keep his mouth shut, rather than deal with any fallout, so that he could end the date.

"Sounds interesting," was all he said.

He saw a flash of anger in her eyes, and decided then and there that he'd made the right decision.

When his date turned her gaze back to Harry, Harry jumped up as if he'd been stung, and offered his hand to Daphne. "Would ye like to dance, lass?"

Apparently, they were on the same wavelength because the two of them deserted the table quicker than spit, a Harry euphemism that seemed to apply to the situation.

Now that it was just the two of them, Oliver felt his stomach tightening.

He'd think that he'd be used to this by now, comfortable with dating, or perhaps simply comfortable with the feeling of wishing he was anywhere but there.

This was worse than usual. At least Harry hadn't deserted him in the past.

They were going to have words later.

The girl across from him — he really couldn't remember her name — gave him a tight smile. "I wouldn't mind a spot of dancing, myself," she said.

Dread rose within him. This was not a woman he wanted in his arms. The thought of Alice Munro once more popped into his head.

He didn't know what it was about her that had fascinated him so. With Harry coming into his life the way he had, a larger-than-life reanimated ghost from the eighteenth century, perhaps it had given Oliver delusions of grandeur.

Perhaps he wanted to be the hero of his own story.

He supposed that he was one to certain people. Those impressed by the money he made, which had only been a side benefit from doing what he loved.

But that didn't count. What he really wanted was for someone to look at him the way Daphne looked at Harry.

He wanted to save Alice.

His date, the woman across from him, Kimberly — Kaitlin — he was pretty sure her name started with a K — let out a sound of disgust, and stood up from the table.

She was angry with him and he couldn't blame her. He might've been staring at her while he'd been thinking about his undone heroic deeds, which was not very heroic of him now that he thought about it.

"Do you want to dance, or what?" she asked.

He really didn't, but resigned himself to doing so, and pushing his drink aside, stood, and offered his arm.

It wasn't her fault she wasn't the girl he was interested in. She'd accepted this date in good faith. And though there wouldn't be a second, he could at least comport himself in a gentlemanly manner.

They moved onto the dance floor, danced stiffly together, had minimal conversation, and when they finally called Chatterton to bring the limousine around, all that he felt was relief.

He walked Katie — Katrina — Kendra — or whatever her name was to her door, and did the gentlemanly thing and thanked her for the evening. "Thank you, Kelsey, dinner and dancing is always fun."

With a noise of disgust, she turned away, stuck her key in the lock, and then turned back. "My name is Mallory," she said with a snap, and then slammed the door shut in his face.

"Just so," he said with a nod at the closed door, and then turned and made his way back to the limo.

When he climbed inside it was to see Harry and Daphne smiling at him.

As he knew both of them so well, they didn't fool him for a moment.

"Good date, aye?" Harry said brightly.

"Yes, she seemed very nice," Daphne agreed with her fiancé, and from the look Harry shot her, she wasn't fooling either one of them.

Daphne had detested the woman.

"Yes, she did seem nice," Oliver said.

Harry made a noise of distress.

Oliver knew he felt bad for stealing Daphne away, though they'd never actually been an item, he'd just hoped they would be, but it didn't keep him from turning the screw. "I want to see about that ghost."

Harry threw up one hand as Daphne was clinging to the other. "Not this again. I told ye, if I can get Wickham tae come tae London, then we'll take him out there. If he'll go. He's a cantankerous male witch, so I cannae make any promises, ye ken?"

Oliver didn't respond.

Harry made an agonized moaning sound. "Come now, man. Ye've not had dealings with the witch or ye'd not be asking him for favors."

"You were favored by a witch."

Harry shook his head. "Ye doonae know what ye speak of. Soni was an entirely different animal. We watched her grow from a wee lass, into a beautiful young woman, and she was as beautiful inside as out. O'course, she wanted to help us. Wickham is an entirely different species."

Oliver glanced out the window for a moment, and then looked at Harry once again. "It's all good and well for you, isn't it? You've got Daphne, but what of me?"

"Aaaaahhh!" That fast Harry turned into a seething, boiling cauldron of guilt, and Oliver exchanged a glance with Daphne, both of them used to the deep well of emotion that was Harry. "All right! I'll do it! I'll try once more."

Harry was breathing harshly with tautly controlled energy. "But ye already know I tried tae call the man, and he refused tae come tae the phone. I doonae ken what ye want me tae do? Kidnap him? Forcibly drag him here? That would never work, and he'd nae doubt kill me for the insult."

"We could bribe him?" Oliver said.

"With what?" Harry asked, his hand up in the air once again as if disbelieving they could come up with anything that a witch might want.

"Money?" Oliver said, his tone implying Harry lacked brain cells.

Harry's face froze, his mouth half open, as if thinking on the matter. "Mayhap it could work." He nodded. "Mayhap the man could be open tae a bit of bribery. He's wily, tricky, and scathing. But he has a lot of men out and about the place, and he's feeding them. Mayhap he could be bribed, as money must be drainin' from his coffers."

"All right, offer him whatever you think, and have him come to London. I'll pay the bribe, as much as it takes, to get him to agree to give Alice Munro a second chance."

"Now, now," Harry's voice rose. "I didnae say she'd get a second chance. I cannae promise such things. Wickham is ... he's Wickham. He'll do as he likes. I've only promised tae try and get him tae talk tae ye. Ye'll have tae do the convincing, because if it comes from me, he'll refuse ye out of spite!"

Daphne made soothing noises and rubbed Harry's back to calm him. As always it seemed to work, and once again Oliver was struck by what a good couple they made.

Was it too much for him to ask to have the same thing? A special someone who matched so perfectly?

Not that Alice was necessarily for him, but he was certainly fascinated by her. Meeting her ... it was as if he'd been struck by lightning. He couldn't get her out of his head, and if she wasn't the one for him, perhaps he was meant to do her this favor.

He wasn't very good at fooling himself. Or others, it seemed. Daphne was looking at him now, sympathy in her gaze, and he glanced out the window once more.

He was just asking for a chance.

A chance to play the hero.

If nothing more came of it, then so be it. He could live with that.

Once again, a picture of Alice's perfect face seemed to float before him, and he drew in a deep breath, his resolve hardening.

He had to at least try.



A WEEK LATER, Oliver was working at his desk when Harry came into the room, prowled to the huge window that took up one wall, and looked out over London. After a moment, he stalked back to the door and glanced up and down the hallway, shut it, and finally came to stand on the other side of Oliver's desk.

He sank down on one of the chairs, slumped, and tilted his head to look at the ceiling, his longish, shaggy black hair spilling around his shoulders. Wearing a white shirt and a belted kilt, his large size dominated the stylish chair, making it look small.

He seemed to be having some sort of emotional crisis, but, as that was perfectly normal for Harry, Oliver just waited and watched, amused anticipation building within him.

He had to admit, he enjoyed his job a lot more now that Harry was here, training daily with a sword, arguing, fiercely loyal; he was a whole lot of fun to be around.

Oliver didn't have to wait long.

Harry hoisted himself up, paced back and forth twice, and then finally planted his big hands on the desk, his dark gaze burning. "Wickham has agreed tae meet at the *Swan and Fox*. We'll see what he has tae say."

Oliver immediately smiled. "Oh, brilliant!" They'd been thrown out of Harry's favorite pub, and had only recently received permission to go back as Harry hadn't quit pestering the manager until she'd relented. Harry had been on his best behavior, but as they'd only been back twice so far, Oliver wasn't expecting the concession to last. "You're sure it's the best place to meet?"

"Tis my favorite pub!" With a glare, Harry shoved off the desk to pace once more.

Harry's indignation had Oliver's brows rising. "All right." It wasn't like he could stop Harry doing whatever he wanted.

"Wickham is coming tae town tomorrow," Harry practically growled the words. "We're tae meet him at 6 o'clock."

"Good on you, Harry. Well done."

Harry nodded, his fists clenching as he pressed his lips together as if he held back some sort of emotional angst. After glaring at the expensive paintings on one wall he said, "Tis just that ye must be on yer best behavior with him. Ye'll let me do the talking. I told him ye'd give him 5000 pounds, sterling, mind ye. See that ye have it with ye."

Oliver wasn't surprised by the amount. He'd pay much more, of course, but Harry was the most frugal person he knew, and to him 5000 pounds probably seemed more like a million. "Is Daphne coming?"

Harry shook his head. "Nae. Tis best tae leave her out of this. I may have mentioned her, but I doonae wish Wickham tae meet her quite yet. If he asks, we'll just say she's workin'."

"She's pretty good with Highlanders."

Harry glanced at him, his face suddenly frozen as if struck by the thought. "Tis true, she might soften his behavior, but nae," he was shaking his head again. "He's a witch. Tis best to keep Daphne out of it."

Harry walked to the window again. "Nae, I'll no' do it," he said, more quietly and under his breath, and then he was speaking Gaelic, which Oliver had no hope of understanding.

He had to admit he'd never seen Harry quite this rattled. "What will I say to him?"

Harry's eyes blazed. "Did ye no' hear me, laddie? Yer tae let me do the talkin'."

Oliver lifted both hands in the air. "All right, all right. I'll just get the money together and we'll meet him at the pub."

Harry nodded and swiped a hand over his mouth in a nervous gesture. "Ye do that. Ye do that," he said as he crossed to the adjoining office door.

Oliver heard Daphne's happy greeting before the door closed once more.

He sank back into his office chair and realized he was smiling in satisfaction. Harry might be nervous, but Oliver was nothing but excited.

Finally, he was to meet the witch.



HARRY AND OLIVER arrived at the pub early and Oliver had a packet

of money tucked inside his jacket.

Daphne had pitched a fit about not being able to go, and had refused to let Harry come up to her apartment after work the night before. He'd gone home with Oliver instead.

Regardless, Harry had stood firm.

They settled up to the bar, and the dark-haired manager gave them both the evil eye before she turned to help other customers, a reminder that they were to be on their best behavior.

The barkeep asked what they wanted, and Harry ordered ale, "Three of them," he said.

The man gave a nod, and in silence they watched him pour three ales and set them on the counter.

Harry drank half of his in one go while Oliver looked on in astonishment. Not that he hadn't seen Harry toss back ale before, because he did so on a regular basis. It was just that as emotional as Harry was, nerves were not really something Oliver associated with him. He was bold, brash, and sometimes out of control, but never nervous.

Or, at least, Oliver had never seen it before.

The sky seemed to darken — summer clouds blocking the sun? — and at that same moment the door opened and a man, all in black except for the white shirt at his collar, entered the pub.

Heads lifted all around to look at the stranger in their midst.

Oliver gave Harry a nudge, but Harry, both hands wrapped around his glass only stared into the contents. "I know, laddie, I can feel him comin'."

Harry was hard to miss, and the man coming toward them, his dark-eyed gaze scanning the pub, didn't seem to miss much. He walked up to the bar and stood near Harry, but not close enough to cause offense, even if he'd been a stranger.

Eyes wide, Oliver blinked at the other man as Harry slid one of the glasses toward him. "Ah, that's kind of ye tae think of me," Wickham said, because it had to be the witch.

Harry finally seemed to gather himself, any hint of nerves long gone as he turned to face the other man, his shoulder blocking Oliver's view.

Oliver took a step back so he could see, just as Harry said, "I'm a generous sort."

Wickham laughed. "Good then. Speaking of generosity, I'll be having my money now."

"No' until we've had our say."

Wickham, his right elbow leaning on the bar, his foot upon the rest, glanced at Oliver, and back to Harry. "Yer say, is it? I thought ye'd said enough when ye lived on my property, rent free, I might



add, eating more than yer fair share of any food on offer. Ye were ready to open yer maw tae any who cared to listen if I remember aright, and I do. Now as tae that money?"

Oliver reached inside his jacket pocket and Harry lifted a hand to stop him. "Ye'll have yer money, no question about that. But we've a favor to ask."

"A favor, is it?"

"Och, mon, we just thought, being the decent man that ye are, ye'd want to earn the payment fair and square."

"Nae, I'll just drink my ale, take the cash, and be on my way," Wickham said. "I've my sisters tae visit, and though Soni still insists ye're family of sorts, ye're still not blood. I'm expected at tea."

"Tea, is it?" Harry snorted. "If ye're no' in a generous sort of mood, how about we just make ye an offer?"

Wickham settled onto the stool. "What did ye have in mind?"

Harry glanced at Oliver. "Are ye sure, laddie? Now ye've met the man, do ye still wish tae deal with him?"

Oliver nodded. "Yes. Go on, ask him."

"Why do ye no' ask me yerself?"

Oliver flushed and took a step forward so he wasn't standing behind Harry. It made him feel better and, as this was his business, he *should* be the one doing the asking.

"Oliver, nae. Ye doonae know who ye're dealing with, and I'd just as soon keep it that way. In fact, get us a table, order something to eat, just for the two of us, mind ye, and I'll join ye in a moment."

Oliver shrugged his hand away. "There is a ghost in Lady Maren's garden. I want you to bring her back, and I'm willing to pay you to do so."

Wickham studied Oliver for a long moment, smiled, and then laughed. "Is that so? Ye've seen a ghost and ye thought I'd be willing tae bring her back for ye?" He glanced at Harry and laughed again. "It seems someone's been telling tales, aye?"

Harry growled, but before he could say anything, Oliver spoke over the top of him. "I've got this," Oliver reached into his jacket pocket, took out an envelope, and handed it to Wickham. "There's more where that came from. If you'll just come to Lady Maren's garden and see Alice Munro, I think you'll be moved by her plight, and willing to help us."

Wickham arched a brow.

Harry groaned. "I did not tell ye as I didnae think he'd come, but Wickham is rich as Croesus. He'll no' care about yer money."

"Perhaps he'll do it because he has a good heart," Oliver was quick to insert.

Harry snorted, and Wickham laughed.

Oliver, still holding the envelope, felt slightly foolish. "I could donate money to a charity of your choice."

"I'm already running a charity, lad, so if it's all the same to ye, I'll take that money and put it to my own good use." Wickham leaned forward and took the envelope. "We'll call this a down payment, shall we?"

"You'll do it?" Oliver said as the other man put the envelope in his own jacket pocket. "I mean, that's wonderful, thank you! Truly, thank you!"

"When and where?"

"Lady Maren's house in Staffordshire tomorrow at noon."

"No, laddie. I'll see ye at ten o'clock tomorrow. Some deeds are best done in the dark."

"Why not midnight?" Harry's tone was ironic.

Wickham's lips curled. "Never midnight. When ye finish yer business, ye'll want the pubs to be open." He tapped his temple. "Sometimes ye just doonae think."

Harry scowled, and Oliver nodded. "All right. Ten o'clock tomorrow night."

Wickham finished his drink and set down his glass. "And ye're going to owe me a favor. To be collected when I see fit."

Oliver's heart was pounding in his chest. Alice was going to get her second chance. He would do almost anything to make sure that happened.

Negotiating on her behalf might not be the heroic deed he'd dreamed about, but it was certainly a start and he felt as light as air and ten feet tall.

To be able to do this, to arrange for Alice to have a second chance, he'd pay whatever it took.

"Oliver," Harry said, warning in his tone. "Don't be —"

"Agreed," Oliver quickly held out his hand and Wickham's lips curled into a not very nice smile as they shook.

Harry stared at their clasped hands, looking sick. "Oh, laddie, ye've done it now."

"And Harry, speaking of cash, a little bird told me Sweeney's down at the docks and could use a bit himself. As yer flush now, I thought ye'd like tae know."

Harry, still looking miserable, nodded.

For his own part, Oliver felt nothing but satisfaction. He had done it! He'd secured the witch's agreement!

Wickham's lips curled again and Oliver shivered.

Good man or not, it didn't matter.

All that mattered now, was Alice.

## Chapter 2

They were waiting in Lady Maren's garden just before ten o'clock the next night.

Much to Harry's dismay, Oliver had spilled the beans, and so Daphne was there as well.

Harry had tried to get her to stay home, but she would have none of it, and insisted if they didn't take her along, she'd make her own way there.

As for Oliver, he left them to it, their bickering throughout the day bothering him not at all. He'd simply closed the door between his office and Daphne's as their disagreement escalated.

The more the merrier as far as he was concerned, and Alice might actually appreciate having a woman there, one so near her own age, when she was brought back to life.

He found himself grinning again.

Six months ago, if anyone would have told him he would be here right now, waiting for a resurrection, he'd never have believed it.

When Harry went to have a look around, Daphne pulled Oliver aside. "I'm worried about you."

"How so?"

"You seem to want to be Alice's white knight. What if this works? You'll need time to get to know her. Relationships take time to develop."

"You and Harry got engaged rather quickly."

"We did. But I did know Harry for three months before he proposed. If you give yourself the same amount of time, I'll be happy."

"I'm planning to bring her home quicker than that."

"That's fine. But that'll give her time to get situated, to get used to this time and place, to be sure of her feelings, and of your own. Promise me?"

He rolled his eyes. "We don't even know if this is going to work."

"Just promise me."

"Fine. I promise."

At precisely ten o'clock, a bright light flared within the garden, near the fountain, and Oliver, Harry, and Daphne made their way

toward Wickham.

“Showoff,” Harry muttered.

Oliver took the lead, Harry came up behind him and had his arm swept out to keep Daphne behind him muttering the entire way.

Using the flashlights on their phones, they walked past the rosebushes, heavy with fragrance in the cool night air, and made their way to where Wickham stood beside the fountain.

He held a shovel in his hand, and the sight of it made Oliver slightly queasy.

Apparently, it upset Harry as well, because looking spooked, he crossed himself and then went off like a rocket. “What on God’s green earth are ye doin’ with a shovel, mon? If ye think we are tae desecrate a grave, ye are sadly mistaken.”

The man laughed, and dropped the shovel. “Don’t worry, I was just having some fun.”

Harry made an exasperated noise.

Laughing again, Wickham turned to Oliver. “So,” his eyes were bright, the lights from their flashlights glinting off them, making them look like black holes in his face. “The man of the hour is here. The hero of the story.”

Oliver held himself still and tried not to squirm. Could the man have been reading his thoughts yesterday in the pub?

He glanced at Harry, but couldn’t exactly ask him that question in front of the male witch, so he kept his peace.

“Why are ye dressed like that?”

Oliver glanced down at his grey suit. “We never made it home to change,” was what he said. The man didn’t know he’d wanted to impress Alice.

Wickham snorted. “All right,” he glanced around. “I see that ye do have a ghost problem here. Are ye sure the owners of the place will thank ye for ridding them of their wee little issue?”

“What do you mean?” Oliver asked.

“Perhaps they like having a ghost in their garden.”

Oliver couldn’t deny it. Lady Maren was thrilled to have a ghost. “Oh, but surely she would wish the girl a chance to live her life.”

He glanced around, willing the ghost to appear so she could sway the witch.

If she was there, Oliver couldn’t see her.

“Well, as to that, who can say what people will or will not like. But, we’re here, so we might as well dig around a bit, what say ye?” Wickham laughed.

The three of them just stared until he finally shook his head. “No’ one of ye has a sense of humor? If this isnae tae be fun, then why are we here?”

Oliver's chest tightened. Wickham would leave if he wasn't having fun? "No, I swear, this is going to be fun. We're just getting this party started, aren't we? Harry? Daphne?"

Harry looked grim, and Daphne worried.

"What should we do?" Oliver asked.

Wickham looked more amused than ever. "We find us a ghost. From the feel of this place, it was a bad death."

"What?" Oliver asked again.

"Well, she was murdered and then buried in the garden. What did ye expect? Though I doona see her anywhere about at the moment."

Oliver was getting more worried by the second. If something didn't happen soon, the man might leave, and it would all be for nothing.

"Harry, do you see her?"

Harry glanced around and shook his head. "Sorry, lad."

"Alice!" Oliver called out her name. "Alice, are you here?"

All of them waited, but it quickly became apparent that Alice was not going to appear.

"We've brought him! We have the witch here with us!"

When nothing happened, Oliver glanced at the shovel Wickham had dropped.

Wickham laughed. "Now I'm amused."

Oliver swept the area with his flashlight and said to Harry, "Keep him here, will you? I'm going to look for her."

He walked through well-groomed paths, and called out her name.

He and Daphne had discussed the fact that he might not be able to see her without holding on to Harry. At least that had been the case the last time, so he changed his wording to, "Alice, head to the fountain. Alice, you need to go to the fountain!"

Surely, if she would go, Wickham and Harry would see her.

"Who's there?"

At the sound of a rough male voice, Oliver stopped to see Lord Maren coming through an arbor, the light from a flashlight wildly darting.

"Lord Maren? It's me, Oliver Graham."

"Oliver?" The beam blinded him. "What are you doing here?"

Oliver raised his hand to block the light. They'd discussed asking Lord and Lady Maren for their permission, but decided against it. Harry had cautioned that one never knew what Wickham would do.

They all figured the Marens would be sound asleep, and they'd have the garden to themselves, anyway.

"I'm sorry, I'm here with Harry and Daphne, and another friend. We're ghost hunting."

Lord Maren dropped his flashlight, but Oliver could still see the confusion on his face. "Ghost hunting! What are you talking about,

boy?"

"Look, I'm sorry. We're not hurting anything, we're just having a look around. Can I call you tomorrow and we can talk about it?"

A white gown floated through the darkness behind Lord Maren and Oliver's heart seemed to stop, and then pound with renewed force.

"Elton? What's happening?"

It took Oliver a moment to realize it was just Lady Maren, joining her husband.

"It's Oliver Graham." Lord Maren moved the flashlight around. "Harry and Daphne are here somewhere, as well. They're looking for ghosts." He turned to glare at his wife, his flashlight beam dropping to the ground. "I told you no good would come of this, you need to stop telling people your garden is haunted or we'll be overrun with those paranormal freaks from the TV, scouting out the place at midnight."

Oliver's face heated, and he was glad for the dark. "We're just having a little fun," he said weakly.

"Elton, they're welcome here whenever they like. Where are Harry and Daphne? Shall we move inside and say hello?"

"You're not doing anything freaky in here, are you?" Lord Maren said darkly.

"No, sir. Simply looking for the ghost."

Lady Maren clapped her hands. "Perhaps I might be of use?"

That caught Oliver's attention. "Have you seen her?"

"No, I've still not seen her, though since you and your friends did of late, I've certainly spent more time in the garden looking."

Oliver sighed, and then turned off his flashlight. "If it's all the same to you, I think we'll keep looking for a while."

"Do you want help?" Lady Maren offered again.

"Leave the boy alone. He's here with his friends, having a good time, and doesn't need us old fogies getting in his business. Enjoy yourself, son. We're going to bed."

His wife protested as he led her away.

Oliver scouted around the garden again, calling Alice's name softly before returning to find Harry and Wickham having words.

"All I'm sayin' is that ye left us there," Harry sounded aggrieved. "Ye could've come much sooner than ye did, and if ye had tae supply a bit of room and board, ye've nae right tae feel sour 'bout it!"

"I didnae begrudge ye a thing, laddie. Ye try being saddled with thirty odd ghosts come back from the grave, and see how ye like it."

The two men glared at each other and Oliver cleared his throat. "I saw Lord and Lady Maren, but I could not find Alice."

"Mayhap she doesna wish tae be found," Wickham said.

Oliver ignored him. "She most definitely does," he stated emphatically. "She specifically asked for us to bring you here, so she

could have a second chance.”

Wickham looked around. “Weel, she’s no’ here now. Let’s go.”

Oliver protested, but was ignored as Harry, happy to oblige the man, escorted Oliver and Daphne out at speed.

Oliver continued to look around, and even dug his heels in for one last look back.

It did him no good, Alice simply wasn’t there.



THEY RETURNED to the limo and drove about 4 km down the road to Wickham’s favorite pub to get a drink.

Harry was smiling, relieved, and gregarious with it, and when they arrived at the wood-paneled pub, filled with fifteen or so patrons, he greeted everyone as if they were long lost kin, before ordering drinks for the four of them.

They all slid into a booth, and Oliver tried to hide his unhappiness, but he didn’t think he did a very good job because Wickham, sitting across from him, looked amused.

“Ye’ve had an easy life, have ye not, laddie? Things have come easy to ye, so ye expected that this would as well?”

“I just felt like she deserved a second chance.”

“What would ye know about what she deserves? Ye doonae even know her. She could be a terrible person and have used her life for ill. Perhaps she deserved an early death and a burial in unconsecrated ground.”

Oliver slammed his fist on the wood table making Daphne jump. “No, she didn’t. No one deserves to have their life snatched away at such a young age.”

Wickham shrugged, unconcerned. “And yet it happens every day. None of us have any guarantees. No one’s promised that ye all get to live to the age of ninety-nine and die in yer sleep. That’s the fantasy, lad. The fairytale. We’re talkin’ about real life here.”

“In real life, a young lady was murdered. Just because it happened, doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

Wickham laughed again. “I have to wonder if ye would feel this way if the lass had the face of a sunken bog.”

Oliver couldn’t deny the way Alice looked had appealed to him, so he simply shrugged his agreement.

It was strange how he could remember her face so clearly when he could barely remember the girls he’d dated recently.

But Alice ... those silver blue eyes surrounded by dark lashes and brows. The fine, straight locks of blonde hair. Lovely, fragile, and somehow, he’d seen her clearly though she’d been but a shadow of

herself.

This wasn't over. Somehow, someway, he was going to save her. Harry tossed back his drink and ordered another. Daphne, seated beside him, was looking down and folding her napkin into little accordion pieces, her drink untouched in front of her.

Oliver hadn't touched his either.

Wickham glanced around. "If ye're so sure of yerself, mayhap ye should be the one to take the chance."

"What do you mean?"

"Are ye willing to sacrifice something to save the girl?"

"I've offered you money."

Wickham snorted and took an envelope out of his pocket and held it out. Returning his money?

Oliver shook his head. "Keep it."

"See ye in the garden, in say, nine days?"

The lilting comment had Oliver glancing from Wickham's laughing dark eyes to the envelope, and he reached out to take it. "The garden?"

Harry choked and slammed his glass down. "Nae, doonae touch it!"

Too late.

The moment Oliver's fingers clasped the envelope a surge of electricity arced up, and a sharp noise had him flinching even as everything seemed to go dark. He had the envelope tight in his hand and glanced around. "Harry?"

There was nothing but silence. "Daphne?"

There was no response. The lights came back on with quickness and force and the room spun, moving into odd shapes and colors. His skin tightened and expanded and with a yell, he placed his hand, still gripping the envelope, over his heart.

He thunked down hard on the bench he'd been seated on and tried to catch his breath as he glanced around.

It wasn't a bench, but a chair, and everything was different. The wood-paneling replaced with rough, unpainted walls, wood planks on the floor and cross beams on the ceiling.

A fire crackled in the hearth, and the people around him, all of them dressed in odd clothing, stopped talking and turned to look at Oliver.

"And where did you come from?" A lady wearing a cap, dress, apron, and anywhere from her fifties, to her eighties came forward, stopped by his table, and placed a hand on her hip.

Her mouth parted in astonishment and she looked to be missing more than a few teeth.

She wasn't the only one astonished.



“Is it just a drink or is it food you’ll be wanting?”

She glanced at Oliver’s clothing, at the gold ring on his hand, and then gave him a flirtatious smile. “Or are you wanting a bit more than that, good sir?”

Oliver shook his head.

“Have you any coin?”

Oliver felt for his wallet. Gone. As was his phone. Thanks for that, Wickham. He didn’t carry cash anyway, and even if he did, he suspected this woman wouldn’t accept it as such. He looked at the envelope, still in his hand and opened it quickly. There wasn’t any money inside, and he drew out the piece of paper. It was a letter of recommendation, from a Lord Wickham.

Oliver snorted.

“Well?” The lady was still waiting for an answer.

He tucked the paper back inside the envelope and tucked it inside his pocket. “Ah, no. No, I don’t.”

The fake smile dropped from her face and left her looking mean. “Well, then get on out of here. We don’t need your kind, whoever you are, do we?” She threw an arm out, including the rest of the clientele, who quickly shouted their agreement.

Oliver stood, nodded at the lady, and headed for the door. He walked out into the dark night, and glanced up and down the road.

His friends, Wickham, the limousine and Chatterton were nowhere to be seen.

In fact, there were no vehicles to be seen at all. A few horses, and even some farm animals scattered about, but Oliver was alone.

A small dog crossed the road toward him.

He smiled. He’d never been slow on the uptake, and, little dog or no, he wasn’t in Kansas anymore.

Staffordshire had just become a whole lot more interesting.

## Chapter 3

June, 1771

ALICE MUNRO LAID out her father's breakfast. She cut him a slice of bread and added butter and jam, placed a cup of milk beside his plate, and set about frying some eggs.

Her father came into the room and she smiled. "Good morning."

Her father, a big man with a gray beard and gray hair gave her a warm smile.

"Dandelion, standing there, you look exactly like your mother did the day that I married her."

She smiled, nodded, as both warmth and sorrow filled her. Her mother had been gone two years now, and they both missed her still. Her eyes flitted to the curtains, cushions, and the wooden chest, evidence of her life.

According to her mother, her estranged brother had brought her some possessions after she'd married. Two books, a beautiful vase, and some clothing.

They were to be Alice's should she ever marry.

He sat, and she soon set the eggs onto plates, and brought them over to the table. She placed one in front of him, and set her own opposite. When they were both seated, she said a quick prayer, and he started to eat. "You know," her father said. "Someday, I'm hoping that you'll marry, preferably sooner rather than later."

It was as if he was reading her mind. "Do you dislike my cooking?" she teased. "Are you hoping to bring a new wife home?"

Her father laughed. "Tis not that. Tis not that at all."

She knew why he was bringing this up, and took a bite of food to forestall the conversation.

"Tis just that you were born so pretty and sweet. Tis a shame you haven't found a husband yet."

She shot him a smile. "That's a shame, is it? You'd rather I was ugly as a troll and four feet wide?"

Her father laughed. "No such thing, I'm just worried about you. I'd like to see you married and settled, sooner, rather than later."

"I'll need a husband for that."

"Now, now. You know you could have your pick of lads around about. Would you like me to bring a different one home for dinner each night?"

"Don't you dare!"

Her father laughed again and they finished their breakfast.

She knew why he was worried about her.

Lord Burbidge, the master of the manor house, had his eye on her. Which placed her in a very vulnerable position.

She hadn't told her father that Lord Burbidge had cornered her on several occasions recently, and if the house were not so full of servants, she among them, she'd be worried for her virtue.

His lordship had become quite obsessed of late, and she knew that marriage could be a way out for her.

It would be nice to fall in love first, however. What would that be like?

She thought about the men who worked under her father, five in all, caring for the property under his tutelage, taking care of lawns, gardens, trees, bushes, and more.

Unfortunately, none of them appealed to her.

"I'll be all right, don't you worry about me."

"I do worry about you," he said quietly. "All I'm saying is just think about it, will you? Just consider that there might be someone for you, and that marriage can be a protection, and a joy."

"I am just not interested in marriage."

Her father made a scoffing noise. "Every girl is interested in marriage."

She was becoming less sure of that. "And what about love?"

"Sometimes, love comes later."

She nodded, knowing this had been the case for her parents. A hard beginning had turned into a joyful home. Still, her mother had wanted Alice to do everything in the correct order.

Alice turned the conversation to mundane things, and then hurried and cleaned up as it was getting time for them both to leave. She to the manor, and her father to the gardens.

Not for the first time, the fact that her father was head gardener, had a surge of gratitude welling within her.

Their cottage was small: bedroom, loft, kitchen, but it fit their needs and gave them privacy they'd otherwise not have had.

It gave her a semblance of family life.

Most of the girls that worked in the manor house had rooms upstairs, and they didn't get to see their families but once or twice a year.

Even those who lived nearby.

She was grateful for her circumstances.

She bid her father farewell, and he went in one direction, and she walked toward the manor house.

As she usually did, she made her way under the arbor and into the huge rose garden, prepared to wind her way through, to an exit closest to the back of the manor house.

She was about halfway through, enjoying the color and fragrance, when Mr. Reardon, Lord Burbidge's man, stepped out from behind one of the tall bushes and moved directly in her path.

Her eyes widened, her heart leapt and then started to pound and she pressed a hand to her chest as her breath caught.

He was very large, stout, round-faced, with an overlarge mouth and narrow lips. He didn't say anything, but simply stared at her, and the hair on the back of Alice's neck lifted unpleasantly.

She finally said, "Mr. Reardon, is there something I can do for you?"

Quicker than she'd have thought possible, he grasped both of her elbows, and pulled her forward against him.

Shock tightened her throat for a moment, and she finally choked out, "Mr. Reardon." She pressed her hands against his chest and pushed. "Unhand me at once!"

His fingers clenched painfully on her upper arms until she was frozen in place, like a rabbit, facing a fox. "What are you doing?" She tried to keep calm, but her voice came out high pitched and thin. She sucked in a breath. "You need to let me go."

"Why should I do that?" He chuckled, low, deep, and sounding truly amused. "I'm wantin' ye to know that while ye think ye're too good for the rest o' us, ye're not."

Alice stood frozen within his grasp. "I ... I ... Mr. Reardon, I do not think that. Why would you say such things to me?" She struggled against him for a moment longer, and with an ugly laugh, he finally let her go.

She stumbled back a few paces before catching her balance.

"I've seen ye prancing around 'ere, pretty as a picture, talkin' like yer mum and actin' like ye're better than everyone. Given 'alf a chance, I'd show ye what's what."

Now that she was free, she thought to stand up to him, or push past him, but immediately changed her mind and ran in the other direction.

Flowers, which seemed so beautiful to her only moments ago, now felt like a trap. She glanced back over her shoulder, but Mr. Reardon was not chasing her, though she didn't slow until she was out of the garden and on the lawn once more.

Her heart pounded, swift and violent, and she tried to catch her

breath.

She wanted to run and find her father, tell him what had happened, but to what benefit?

If her father tried to face down Reardon, the other man might actually hurt him. He was a sadist and a bully and cruel to others. Lord Burbidge usually kept him reined in, but there was no telling for sure what the man would do.

She glanced left, and right, but he was nowhere to be seen, and she darted up the slope to the kitchen door at the back of the manor. She glanced over her shoulder, half expecting him to be there, trying to intercept her.

She took a moment to compose herself before going inside, and when she did, Cook, an older lady with her hair pulled up into a bun, looked up from the pot she was stirring and laughed. "My goodness, ye look flushed this fine morn. Did ye run all the way 'ere?"

She was safe. She breathed in and out, and felt her heart slow. She took a breath to speak, but it stuck in her throat. She swallowed, licked her lips, and forced a smile. "I simply wanted to get an early start on the day."

She considered telling Cook what had just happened, but the older woman wouldn't be able to do anything about it either.

After all, nothing untoward had actually occurred.

She rubbed her upper arms knowing there would be bruising, but also knowing no one would ever see it.

"There's a good girl." Cook was cracking eggs now. "We've a lot to do with a dinner party and then a house party in the next week. Mrs. Quinn said she's going to want everything polished and gleaming and shown to its best advantage, so you girls will need to look sharp."

Alice glanced at the three other girls. Ginny was rolling out biscuits. At seventeen, she was a few years younger than Alice and had her swath of ginger red hair tied back into a braid. Fiona, a dark-haired girl a few years older than Alice was gently stacking a set of clean plates. She was Lady Burbidge's personal maid, but she helped out if she wasn't needed above stairs. And Ida, a jolly red-faced woman in her thirties was scouring a pot.

The warmth of the kitchen, the chatter between girls, and the instructions of Cook, swirled around her giving her a warm glow and a feeling of safety.

Alice lifted an apron off a nail and tied it around her waist.

She wouldn't tell Cook what had happened, and upset everyone. No one could do anything about it, and if it got back to Reardon, it would go so much the worse for her.

And maybe for her father.

Nothing had really happened, she assured herself. He'd just given

her a scare. She was all right now.

“And ’ow is your father this morning?”

“He’s doing well. Remembering my mother this day.”

Cook gave a nod. “She was a fine woman. We all still miss her.”

“Is there anything you need of me?”

Cook gave her another smile. “No, you can go about your business. I ’ave enough ’elp in the kitchen for now.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Go on with you.”

Alice took a stack of plates and went through the kitchen doors, down the hallway, past the staircase, and into the dining room.

Still feeling a little weak and jittery, she pushed aside her feelings and went inside and set the table.

Mrs. Quinn poked her head in. “Good morning, Alice.”

Alice nodded. “Good morning, Mrs. Quinn.”

“Be about your work.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The older lady left and Alice set the plates on the table before hurrying over to draw back the fawn-colored brocade curtains, filling the room with morning sunshine.

She quickly set about her chores, knowing that when the family came down, everything had better be in place, or else.

She set the table, set out the silver, the cloth napkins. She set up the sideboard, lit the candles under the serving trays, and hurried back to the kitchen to get the pitcher of hot water that Cook had readied.

She carefully carried it back and poured the water into the serving trays, then placed the everyday candles on the table.

She made three trips back to the kitchen, bringing a tray of eggs, the covered tray of sausages, and kippers. She went back again for milk, cakes, bread, butter, preserves and tea.

Last, she brought out a covered bowl of porridge.

She straightened a few of the glasses on the table, placing them just so, and she’d just finished up when Lord Burbidge came into the room.

He was alone.

And so was she.



IT WASN’T OFTEN that Oliver went out of his way to impress a woman, and the one time that he desperately wanted to, he smelled like a wet dog.

It certainly wasn’t the way he’d pictured meeting Alice.

So far things hadn't gone as planned.

The night before he'd started to walk, confident he could make it to the Marens's within a couple of hours.

It had started to rain.

As pampered as he'd been his entire life, he'd been completely unprepared to weather the storm, as it were.

Why couldn't Wickham have sent Harry with him?

He wasn't sure how far he'd walked before the dark and the rain had discouraged him from going further.

The dog had been the one to lead him to an abandoned shed.

It had smelled. There hadn't been much inside but moldering straw, but at least it had been dry. The dog had tried to cozy up to him several times during the night, and Oliver must have fallen asleep at one point, because when he'd woken, the dog had been curled in his arms.

Hence the reason Oliver smelled of dog.

Still, he couldn't fault the little thing, as the temperature had dropped in the night.

And it was nice to have company on his journey.

He passed fields, where men had stopped their work to stare at him.

He made it to the next village, and as he started walking through, it quickly became apparent that he stuck out like a sore thumb.

Men and women going about their daily chores stopped to stare at him.

He ignored them and carried on. Passing timber frame houses with thatched roofs, smoke rising from chimneys.

His shoes, already muddy, were stirring up a stench, and when someone walked out of their house and threw a bucket a few feet away from him, he realized he was walking in sewage.

He coughed, gagged, and brought up his arm so he could press the sleeve of his jacket to his nose, and moved out of the muck.

He should pay better attention to the dog, who'd managed to avoid the worst of it.

"And I thought you were the one who smelled," Oliver told the little thing.

"Ye look like a right tasty young lad," a voice to his left caught his attention. The woman stood in a doorway, pose provocative as she looked him over. "Come closer, and I'll let ye sample my wares for a discount."

Harry ignored the woman and moved on, even as she cursed him.

He sped up, and she and her friends burst into laughter, mocking him as he hurried away.

Two men loading a wagon stopped to look at him. "Who are you?"

asked the younger one. He had straw-colored hair and a dumbfounded expression.

His companion stopped to stare as well, his mouth partially open as Oliver said, "How do you do," as he passed by.

The man with the lighter hair took a few steps after him until his companion stopped him.

He really wished Harry had come with him.

But, how would that have worked? It was twenty-five years since Harry's death, and he was here, dead and buried in the ground. A ghost upon the moor.

The thought caused an ache in Oliver's chest.

If he had a car, and smooth roads, he might go and see Harry and give him some encouragement and hope for a brighter future to come.

But he knew he couldn't, and it was simply a fanciful notion. Still, he really did not like the thought of his friend hopeless and forlorn, and wondering why he'd been left behind.

He thought of Alice, once again, the way she'd begged for another chance, the way she'd been left in the same situation for centuries.

That, he could do something about.

He continued to be somewhat of a spectacle as he passed over a bridge, and spotted a church with a cemetery.

He considered asking for help, but he wasn't that far away, and decided to just plow forward.

He turned back to see that there were three men following him, and was about to reconsider his decision when a man, riding toward him on horseback, studied him with something akin to fascination.

Mid-twenties or so, his face all youth and rugged angles, his blue eyes lit with curiosity. He wore brown trousers tucked inside his boots, and was obviously wealthier than any of the people Oliver had seen so far.

He reined in his horse and stared down at Oliver. "Who are you, then?"

He wasn't quite hostile, but didn't strike him as an ally either, so Oliver ignored him and continued on his way.

"Hold up! Who are you?" The man turned his mount and followed Oliver to the sound of squelching hooves sinking in mud and being pulled free.

At least he hoped it was mud.

"I say again, who are you?"

Oliver suspected the man would continue to follow him and, as Oliver wouldn't be able to out-walk the horse, he stopped short. "I am Oliver Graham."

The man reined in his horse again. "Should I know who you are?"

His gaze raked over Oliver's clothing, a gray bespoke suit which



had cost over ten thousand pounds. He suspected that though it was not in the current style, it still depicted wealth in any era.

"I see no reason that you should know who I am. To my knowledge we've not met before."

Of that, Oliver was sure.

"Where are you going?"

Oliver was walking west because, if he'd projected correctly, that was where Lady Maren's house lay. "Lady Maren's," he said.

"Who?"

"A friend," Oliver said.

The man's mouth parted again. "On foot?"

Oliver glanced around. "I seem to have misplaced my horse."

The man threw his head back and laughed. "I am Sir Kirby Wilmot, at your service. You can call me Kirby."

"And I am Oliver. How do you do."

"I could offer you a ride. I fear those clothes of yours will soon be made worthless by the mud."

It was probably too late for that. "I won't be able to pay you."

The man looked him over again. "No?"

Kirby was looking at his Oxford signet ring, made of solid gold. The ring meant a lot to him, but he suspected he could get a replacement once he had Alice, and was back in his own time.

On the other hand, it was now the only thing of value that he had in his possession.

He glanced at the road in front of him, and at the people gathering behind them.

He didn't want to deal with unsavories, and doubted he would be bothered if he was with the other man.

Protection in numbers, and all that.

He was here to save Alice, and if he didn't make it to his destination, then it would all be for nothing, anyway.

On the other hand, with all the training Harry had given him, he didn't like to think he couldn't take care of himself. He certainly felt strong and capable, but that was easy to do with Harry at his side, wasn't it?

Still, it wasn't as if he couldn't use a friend, as well. "All right, if you see me safely to the Maren's property, my university ring is yours."

"Ho! I'll take that deal," Kirby said and held out his hand. "Let us be on our way. Unless you'd like to stop at the pub first?"

"I'm on a mission to rescue a girl, so there will be no waiting around."

"A girl? Is she a lady, then?"

Oliver took the man's outstretched hand, and when he kicked his

boot out of the stirrup, Oliver placed his own shoe inside and hefted himself up behind the other man.

The horse shuffled a bit, but was obviously well-trained, and held his ground.

Kirby gently kicked his heels and they were on their way.



LORD BURBIDGE SPOTTED her at once and a slow smile grew on his face. "Alice, I see you have everything ready for breakfast, and it looks very nice."

He barely glanced around the room at all. As usual, his entire attention was focused upon her.

She stood beside the sideboard, hands clasped together in front of her. "Thank you, my lord."

"You look very, very pretty today."

She looked at the hardwood floor. "Thank you, my lord."

He stopped at the end of the sideboard, a little too close for comfort, and she kept her gaze on the floor, now occupied by his boots.

He wore wool trousers, and a glance up revealed a white shirt and tan waistcoat, without pockets, fitted to his lean midriff.

He picked up a plate on the end of the sideboard and she quickly moved behind it, relieved to put the space between them.

She lifted one lid, and he helped himself to some scrambled eggs. Next, she lifted the lid on the kippers, and he served himself a generous portion, and then onto the sausages and smoked fish before moving onto bread and plum cake.

When his plate was full, he gave her one last look and said, "Bring me some tea, will you?"

"Of course, my lord." He took his plate to the head of the table and sat, and she brought the teapot to his side, her heart starting to pound like a rabbit's, and she stood as far away from him as she could and still pour.

"You know how I like it, Alice."

She flinched, and quickly added milk and sugar.

He was staring and she wished he would stop.

He raised his hand and settled it at her waist and she quickly moved out of the way, relief filling her as she heard conversation outside the room.

She'd just resumed her post behind the sideboard when Lady Burbidge, their nineteen-year-old daughter, Pamela, and the seventeen-year-old twins, Jonathan and Jeremy came in for breakfast.

Lady Burbidge, pale with dark curly hair and expressive brown

eyes gave her a sharp glance, looked at her husband, and then back at Alice again.

“Good morning, Isaac,” she said at last, and then bustled over to the sideboard, the skirts of her peach morning gown swishing with each step she took.

After a quick good morning to her father, Lady Pamela followed her mother, expression sullen.

Alice offered them a smile as she held up the first lid. “Eggs, my lady?”

Lady Burbidge gave her a long stare before she finally nodded and served herself.

The boys joined them, laughing and talking, and the atmosphere relaxed as they each took turns deciding what they wanted before they sat down to breakfast. Alice was quick to offer tea with milk and sugar before taking her place behind the sideboard once more.

“You were up early today, Isaac,” Lady Burbidge said to her husband.

“I was. No rest for the weary. I have much to do this day.”

Lady Burbidge’s gaze slid to Alice, and Alice quickly looked down.

She felt a stab of resentment at the suspicious way Lady Burbidge glanced at her, and for the guilt she felt for something that wasn’t her fault.

She stood still as could be, waiting to see if anyone in the family would like seconds, and it wasn’t long before Lord Burbidge’s parents, Lord and Lady Norrington, came into the room.

Lord Norrington pounded his cane twice on the floor and called out, “Girl, quickly, give me something to eat before I starve to death!”

“Really, Perry,” his wife chided. She could be a bit of a dragon, needing everything to be just so, and Alice loved them both dearly.

Lord Norrington took a seat at the opposite end of the table from his son, and Lady Norrington tried to help him, but he brushed her aside with a gruff reminder that he was a grown man.

Lady Norrington laughed, and walked over to see what was for breakfast.

“You are looking very well today, Alice.”

Alice gave a quick curtsy and smiled. “Thank you, my lady.”

“What temptations has Cook laid out for us this day?”

Alice lifted the lids and served her and then quickly readied a plate for Lord Norrington, and carried it to the table, before serving them tea.

She resumed her post and let the conversation wash over her as the family ate and discussed politics, the weather, and the twins’ education.

“When are you going to get that girl married off?” Lord Norrington

said, his tone gruff.

“Grandfather!” Pamela’s tone was agonized.

“We’ve tried, Grandfather, but no one will have her,” Jonathan said with a grin. Or was it Jeremy? Though she’d helped their governess care for them when they’d been young rascals, she still had a hard time telling them apart.

As Pamela protested, everyone else smiled or laughed.

One of them winked at Alice, and she smiled in return, the bond they’d once shared still in place. It was probably Jonathan, the heir. He was the more mischievous of the two, often getting his brother into trouble.

As breakfast ended, Lord Burbidge was the first to stand, and Alice quickly moved forward to clear his plate away, placing the dishes carefully on a tray behind the sideboard and out of sight.

One by one, they went about their day, and Alice was finally able to take the dishes into the kitchen. When she pushed the door open with her hip, Cook was quick to ask, “And ’ow did it go?”

“It was fine; if I ever was to judge from the way the food was eaten, I would say they all seemed to enjoy breakfast very much today. Lady Norrington sends her compliments to you.”

“Humph,” Cook said, and gave a satisfied nod. “Bring everything back, quick-like, so I can feed this hungry lot,” she glanced at her workers even as the footman, Daniel, came into the room with more of the platters.

Fiona and Ginny helped as well, and between the four of them, they made quick work of the cleanup, and then plates were dished out for each of them from the leftovers.

Alice didn’t eat much as she’d had breakfast with her father, but she enjoyed the camaraderie. The housekeeper joined them, and they made quick work of the leftovers.

Afterward, Mrs. Quinn instructed her to dust the library, and Alice was quick to follow her directions.

She was dusting the books on the bookshelves, one of her favorite tasks, when she felt like she wasn’t alone anymore. She turned, expecting to see Daniel or Mrs. Quinn, and instead saw Lord Burbidge.

Her heart immediately kicked up its rhythm in her chest, and her hand clenched on the lambswool duster. She gave him a curtsy, a quick bob of her knees, and said, “Excuse me, my lord. I can start on another room so as not to disturb you.”

He quickly slid the two doors closed, shutting them in together. Her throat clenched and she made a soft sound of distress, but couldn’t seem to get any words to come out.

She swallowed twice, the sound loud in the enclosed space.

“So, my little dove, I’ve captured you at last.” He said the words

softly, but he may as well have yelled them for the reaction that it triggered in her body.

She jumped backward, glancing around, looking for escape, and knowing there was none. She glanced at the door that led to the study and bolted toward it.

Lord Burbidge lunged and when he caught her around the waist, she gave a startled squeal and he twirled her around until he held her body flush against his.

"No," she said, even as his hand slid down to cup her bottom, and as she arched away from him, pushing at his chest with her hands, he leaned in and kissed her neck, moist kisses that repulsed her and she cried out.

"Hush, hush, my dove." He sounded excited. "We must keep quiet, else we'll be discovered."

Was the man insane? He acted like this was something they were doing together, not something he was doing to her.

Indignation rose, allowing her to find her voice. "Get away from me. Stop what you are doing and get away from me."

She found herself whispering the words, also fearing discovery, which wasn't fair, and left her feeling weak and helpless. She was not complicit in this, she was not! And yet if she screamed, and they were found, who would get the blame?

Whose reputation would be tarnished?

It would be hers. She would be let go, and perhaps even her father's job would be in jeopardy.

She couldn't stand the thought of it and pushed harder and hissed at him with a whispered, "Let go of me!"

Lord Burbidge grinned at her, and then bent his head and tried to kiss her lips, and she arched away once more.

He kissed her neck again as her shoulders hunched to get away from him.

Getting her hands between them, she pushed hard, "Let me go!" she whispered fiercely, but he only grabbed at her, squeezing her body, pressing her close.

"Isaac?" They heard the words through the door, and they both froze, and then Lord Burbidge released her, and hurriedly crossed to the window.

The doors slid open, and Alice, face hot, ducked to one side of Lady Burbidge, without so much as a word.

She hurried to the kitchen, and it felt like a sanctuary.

She stopped just short of the door, smoothed her hair, ran a hand over her neck, and straightened her dress.

She calmly walked inside to find Mrs. Quinn having a cup of tea with Cook.

“Are you done with the library already, my dear?” Mrs. Quinn asked in a repressive tone that said she knew she was not.

She wanted to fling herself into the other woman’s arms, but merely said, “I’ll have to finish later, Lord and Lady Burbidge are in there at the moment.”

“All right, let’s get you back to work then. Why don’t you go and weed the medicinal garden. Afterward, polish the balustrade. Mind you dust the stairs first.”

Alice left, hoping she could perform the new task unmolested.

Mayhap her father was right. Mayhap it was time for her to marry.

## Chapter 4

It drizzled on and off, and Kirby kept up an ongoing conversation. Oliver was grateful for the ride and the company.

Eventually, the other man asked, "Tell me about your lady."

"Her name is Alice Munro, and she works at a manor house in Staffordshire."

Oliver felt a swell of excitement as he thought of the quest that lay before him. And what was a quest without a noble steed, even if it didn't belong to him.

"She is in dire circumstances. Someone is trying to murder her, and I'm here to save her before that can happen."

"Who would murder a lady?"

It wasn't as if he could explain the circumstances so he simply said, "I was told, that is to say, I have it from a good source that she is in danger, so I'm headed out to rescue her."

Kirby nodded. "That sounds a worthy endeavor. Is she a beauty?"

Oliver thought back to the one time he had seen her, a ghostly, wispy figure in a rose garden, and was glad, proud even, to assure the other man, "The most beautiful girl you've ever seen. Golden hair, blue eyes, and the last time I saw her she was in a garden surrounded by flowers. It was a truly fitting background."

"I've met some beautiful women in my time," Kirby said, as if doubting him. "Who is trying to harm her?"

"I don't know. I'll find out when I get there."

"Without a horse? Without a sword?"

That was Wickham's fault. Rather than bringing Alice forward, he'd stolen Oliver away from all that he knew. His trusty horse, his limousine. His weapon, well, Harry. Though he did still have a dagger strapped to his back, as Harry insisted he wear one at all times.

"Yes, I suppose you could say they were stolen, and I was left to my own devices."

The horse walked through a puddle and Oliver certainly was glad to be out of the mud and muck, Kirby's bulk protecting him from the light rain.

"What is the date today?" Oliver asked.

Kirby laughed. "What did they do? Strike you on the head?"

"Something like that,"

"Tis the 28<sup>th</sup> day of June."

Oliver knew he had to ask, so he did so quickly. "And the year?"

Kirby threw back his head and laughed out loud. "They not only stole your possessions but your wits? Tis the year of our Lord 1771."

One week until Alice's murder.

And what had Wickham said? See you in a week? That was cutting it close.

And why wasn't he surprised? He was dealing with a witch. A very wicked one according to Harry.

It took a couple of hours to get to the manor house, by which time Oliver knew all about the Wilmot family, Father, Mother, sister's, cousins, and many of the people who worked for them.

Kirby recognized the place. "The Marens's, you say? This is Rosewood Manor. Lord Burbidge does business with my father."

"I misspoke. The Marens have recommended me for a position here."

"You seem an intelligent sort. If it doesn't work out, you can always come and work for my father."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind."

Kirby dropped him off and Oliver handed him the ring.

Kirby grinned and placed it on his pinky finger. "A university ring. I think it looks better on me, what think you?"

"Perhaps you'll gain intelligence simply by wearing it."

With a laugh, Kirby was on his way and Oliver walked the quarter mile or so from the main road, the little dog trailing behind him.

He arrived at the Marens's manor house and stopped, staring at it for a long moment.

It was so different.

The bones of the old place were the same, but the manor house which had been white, was now brown.

The flower gardens were in the same place, but they were different as well, and there was a huge vegetable garden behind them.

There were trees where none had been before, and the trees lining the drive that he'd been familiar with were gone.

A river still ran along the property. He wished he would have paid better attention before so that he could enjoy this experience more.

Anticipation building, he walked through grass that had once been manicured, and was now longish, the dog still trailing him.

He received looks from several men that were gardening, digging, and moving things about.

No one stopped him.

The sun was shining on his face, birdsong floated on the air, and as



he walked along one side of the garden, he heard humming.

There was an arbor opening into the garden, set between two bushes, and Oliver glanced inside to see a girl down on her knees, pulling weeds.

He stopped, slightly astounded to have simply run into Alice.

It was her, wasn't it? "Hello."

The girl sat back with a wary expression on her face.

An arc of electricity seemed to shoot through him and when she pressed a hand to her chest, he wondered if she felt it too. "Oh, my goodness," she said. "Forgive me."

Big blue eyes stared up at him. She had bright blonde hair that she wore under a white frilly cap, a brown dress, and a white apron.

Oliver finally found his voice. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

She was gazing up at him "Who are you, sir?"

"I am Oliver Graham." His heart was pounding hard in his chest. This was an amazing moment to see her in the flesh. "And you are?"

"Alice Munro." She looked distrustful. "Do I know you, sir?"

Oliver considered telling her that they had briefly met once before, but she would not remember, so instead, he said, "No. But it is so nice to meet you."

He felt a rush of relief flood through him at seeing her alive, to see her breathing, flesh and blood.

He remembered the desperation in her voice when she'd asked if she would get a second chance as well.

He also remembered that she looked just as she did now.

She had a week until she was murdered.

The thought of it had his heart clenching. Why hadn't Wickham sent him earlier?

He wasn't sure what to do. Did he ask her to come away with him?

Did they walk together back to the pub and hope that Wickham was there? He wouldn't be. The witch had told him he had a week.

Anyway, she was looking at him like she didn't trust him.

The dog that had trailed him for miles, returned from whatever he'd been sniffing to sit at Oliver's side.

"A dog!" Alice's expression softened at once. "Is he yours? What's his name?"

Oliver, happy to see her face cleared of distrust, searched for an answer. "Uh ..." He'd thought himself on a quest earlier and the dirty little critter had a few spots on his backside, so he said, "Dapple."

"Oh," she said, holding her hand out to him. "Like the donkey from Don Quixote?"

Oliver was surprised that she'd understood the reference. "Yes, exactly so."

“My mother and I read the story to my father. And are you here, tilting at windmills?”

He laughed. “I guess you could say so.”

The dog, wiggling with excitement, encouraged her to pet him. “Are you here to see someone?”

His stomach rumbled and her eyes lit with compassion. “Are you hungry?”

For the first time in his life, Oliver realized that he was penniless, a new sensation for him.

He’d never been dead broke before.

He needed a job so he had money to live on, so he could romance Alice, and hopefully get her to run away with him.

He remembered the letter of recommendation that Wickham had handed to him, and dug it out of his pocket and gave it a quick scan.

“I’m looking for Lord Burbidge. I am hoping to gain employment.”

Her expression lit. “I was just about to walk to the house. Would you like to come with me?”

He grinned, elation flooding through him. “Thank you. I’d love nothing more.”



THEY WALKED TOGETHER, and Alice kept her gaze on the ground, and Oliver, tongue-tied, was trying to figure out what to say.

He was good at numbers, algorithms, and business plans in general, but his recent experience with dating didn’t seem to have helped him become the glib ladies’ man that he’d hoped it would.

He was very curious about her. The investigative genealogist he’d hired had basically only found one entry. An Alice Munro disappeared on July 6, 1771, presumed to have run away.

And then he’d met her the one time.

He was burning with curiosity, and not suave enough to work it into a conversation, so he simply said, “I am twenty-eight years old. And you?”

She glanced at him, looking slightly askance, but finally said, “I am one and twenty.”

He nodded. “My parents were seven years apart in age.”

Oh, that was slick.

She gave him another look that let him know she thought him strange. “Mine were ten,” she said.

“Are they still around?”

“My father is, but my mother passed on. She had weak lungs.” He could hear an echo of sorrow in her voice.

“I’m sorry. It’s the opposite for me. My father has passed on, and

now it's just me and my mother."

"I'm sorry, as well," she said.

It didn't take them long to reach the manor and Alice said, "Wait here a moment, will you?"

He waited, and she went inside and returned a moment later with a sharp-eyed lady that seemed to take Oliver in with a glance. "Hello, I am Mrs. Quinn, the housekeeper. Can I help you?"

"I would like to speak with Lord Burbidge. I am hoping to approach him about employment." When Oliver spoke, his upper-crust tones apparently impressed the woman as her expression changed immediately. "Yes, sir. Your name?"

"Oliver Graham."

"Does Lord Burbidge know you?"

"He does not. I have a letter of recommendation."

"May I show it to his lordship?"

He pulled it out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

"Will you wait while I discuss this with Lord Burbidge?"

"Of course."

She glanced at his clothing again, and he knew he looked odd, but his clothes were quality, and hopefully that would count for something.

There was nothing he could do about it.

"Alice, wait here with him," the housekeeper finally said. "Go sit on the bench over there and keep him company until I return." She disappeared back inside the house.

Her tone had been slightly sharp with Alice, and Oliver found he didn't like it in the least.

What he did like was that Alice was to stay.

The two of them sat on the bench that overlooked the rose gardens down below. "I'm sorry you're forced to put up with me."

"I suppose I'll have to manage," she said, lips curving, eyes teasing. Oliver laughed.

He found himself feeling relaxed, both in her presence, and in his surroundings. "So, your name is Alice Munro, you are twenty-one years old, and you live with your father."

She arched a brow. "And you are Oliver Graham, you are twenty-eight years old, your father has passed away and your mother depends upon you to find employment."

His mother hadn't depended on him in her entire life, but Oliver could see how Alice had interpreted what he'd said in such a way.

He grinned. "As you can see, I'm not very good with ladies and conversation."

"I will add that to the list." Her gaze searched his for a moment, and he could tell she was trying to form her own opinion of who he

was.

That was fine by him. As he was enjoying staring right back at her, it didn't seem so rude.

She really was beautiful.

In recent weeks, Harry had asked if he'd be so obsessed with saving this girl if she was an old crone, and not so pleasant to look upon.

Oliver's smile widened.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's just that you really are so incredibly pretty."

She glanced away and he could see she was blushing. For some reason that made him feel strong, attractive, and able to take on the world.

She was the one for him, and somehow, he'd save her, woo her, and take her home.

He leaned back on the bench feeling very much at ease. Perhaps because he'd been ghost hunting at the Marens's so much of late.

Harry had also taken a shine to the couple.

He glanced around, wishing Wickham would just whisk them both away, that he could close his eyes, and open them again, and they'd be in his century.

"There's no place like home," he commented aloud.

Alice smiled, and somehow, it made her even more beautiful. "I have found the same to be true," she said. "Are you from around here?"

"I was raised in London," he said, "but, I do have friends around here, and I enjoy the area very much."

"Who are your friends?"

He almost said Lord and Lady Maren, but figured that all the aristocracy would be known in the vicinity, so he changed it to, "Harry and Daphne Crighton."

Daphne would be a Crighton soon enough.

"Are you staying with them?"

"They are not in the area at present. I am hoping to stay here."

"Well, then, I hope Lord Burbidge has a place for you."

He wanted to reach out and take one of the hands she held in her lap, but knew he didn't dare. Not in this place and time.

He thought of all the women he'd been dating. How upon first meeting they'd clung, and often wanted to go home with him after mere hours of acquaintance. How uncomfortable it had made him.

He might not be able to hold Alice's hand yet, but this was better.

"Have you been here your entire life?" he asked.

"Yes. My father is head gardener here."

"Really?" He was interested to hear that. He'd searched her family

tree and there had been a mention of a Munro at the local parish, and the time period seemed to have been correct, but there'd been no connection between the man and Alice to be found. "Is your father's name George Munro, by any chance?"

Her eyes widened, and she nodded. "It is. Do you know him?"

Oh, that was interesting. The genealogist hadn't found anything about a George Munro at Burbidge manor, though he'd been on the records of the church.

The housekeeper returned and both Oliver and Alice stood. "What exactly is your business with Lord Burbidge?" she asked.

"As I said, I am hoping he is going to employ me in some capacity."

"What capacity are you qualified for?"

"I am quite brilliant at anything to do with numbers."

She looked surprised at his statement but only nodded, and again took in his appearance. "If you will follow me, Lord Burbidge will see you."

"Thank you." He turned to Alice. "And thank you for keeping me company."

"I do as I'm told," she said, then gave him a shy smile. "It was a pleasure."

"Mr. Graham?" Mrs. Quinn said.

With one long last look at Alice, and a quick nod and a smile in her direction, he followed the older lady inside.



ALICE WAS in the kitchen when Mrs. Quinn came back in and told her to go upstairs and clean Lady Norrrington's room.

"Honestly, girl, take some initiative," she said, seeming a little more harsh than usual.

She hurried up the back stairs to find Lady Norrrington in her bedchamber, comfortably seated in a plush chair, working on some stitching. A small, white-haired woman, she had slim shoulders, and an impressive bosom that was highlighted by the dark blue dress she wore. She possessed an air of self-assurance and good cheer, and was generally pleasant to be around.

Alice went about her work.

"Tell me about your young man."

"My lady? I don't have a young man."

Lady Norrrington gave her a sly smile. "I saw you out the window, talking to a nice young gentleman. His clothes were interesting. He's not yours?"

Alice felt herself flush. "No, my lady. I just met him. He's hoping to

find employment with Lord Burbidge.”

Alice had noted his unusual outfit as well. A short coat, vest, and long breeches. The latest style from London no doubt, but if she'd not seen it herself, she wouldn't have believed it.

“Perhaps you'd better lay claim to him before he's snatched up by one of the other girls.”

A hot flush rose in Alice's face, and she didn't know what to say, so she turned away to make the bed.

Lady Norrington chuckled.

All the same, Alice had to admit she was feeling as light as air, the excitement of meeting the gentleman leaving her slightly breathless. She didn't know what it was about him, but she really liked him, and he was easy to talk to. And yes, he was young and attractive.

He had a look of competence about him, of success, and she knew that if Lord Burbidge didn't hire him, he probably wouldn't have too much trouble finding another job elsewhere.

She did hope that Lord Burbidge hired him.

She made the bed, dusted, straightened Lady Norrington's desk, and brushed out one of her dresses.

All the while, she found herself smiling.

My goodness, she really had liked that young man, hadn't she?

She knew very little about him, and wished she'd asked more questions.

He was good-looking, intelligent, and there had been something between them.

Perhaps she'd lied to her father this morning, after all.

Perhaps it wasn't that she wasn't interested in marriage, mayhap she just hadn't met the right man.

## Chapter 5

Oliver was told to wait on a bench near the front door.

He wasn't the only one in the room, as there was a footman standing beside a closed set of doors, though they both ignored each other.

The house was opulent. Oak paneling was brightened by a plaster ceiling. Arches, and classical moldings, and a chandelier with unlit candles tied everything together with a nice extravagance.

The bench he sat upon was upholstered, matching the curtains on the windows, and the seat coverings of the chairs across from him.

Wood carvings embellished the window frames, doors, and balustrades. Whites and yellows contrasted nicely with the oak floor and mahogany furniture.

He could see into the dining room which was large and lavish with niches in the walls that held statues he couldn't quite make out.

There was a cabinet he recognized as a Chippendale which displayed fine china. His mother would love to own that.

He tried to memorize everything so he could report back to Lady Maren, who he knew would be very interested in the decor.

A couple of teen boys ran down the stairs at speed, their feet slapping on the polished wood, and it only took a glance to see they were identical twins.

Reddish-brown hair, brown eyes, tall and athletic; their fine clothing implied they belonged to the lord and lady of the house. They stopped short when they saw him.

"Who are you?" one asked.

"Oliver Graham." He stood and stifled the impulse to offer his hand.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm hoping to find employment," Oliver said.

They looked as if they wanted to ask more questions, but the door opened and a man with a strong resemblance to the twins looked at the three of them.

"Mr. Graham? If you would come this way?"

Nodding at the twins, Oliver followed the man into the study.

It was a big room, with a large desk, bookshelves, draperies over the windows, and a fireplace.

In any century, it was a nice room.

The man rounded the desk and took a seat as the doors slid closed behind them.

Oliver would guess that the man was in his forties or so, his reddish-brown hair and beard shot through with just a hint of silver.

"I am Lord Burbidge. Please have a seat, Mr. Graham."

Oliver settled himself in the chair across the desk.

This was a strange proposition for him, as he'd never in his life had to interview for a job. He'd started his own company at Oxford and was the one who hired others. Actually, he had people who did the actual hiring.

The man leaned back in his seat and looked Oliver over. He had Oliver's letter in one hand, and waved it back and forth. "This is a letter of recommendation from Lord Wickham."

Oliver managed not to roll his eyes. Wickham might be a land owner, but he wasn't aristocracy. "Yes, sir."

"It states that you are good with numbers."

This was solid ground for Oliver. "Yes, I am very good with numbers."

Lord Burbidge arched a brow, looking as if he didn't believe a word of it.

He looked at the ledger in front of him and said, "If you had 121 sheep and you sold each for 3 pounds, how much money would you have in your coffers?"

Was this a joke? "You would have 363 pounds," Oliver said. If these were the kinds of things he had to figure out, his university education was about to go to waste.

Lord Burbidge slapped his hand down and said, "Ha!" his tone triumphant. "Actually, that comes out to 356 pounds."

"No," Oliver said. "It does not. My calculation is correct, and I stand by it. It is 363."

Lord Burbidge looked offended. "It is 356!"

"Lord Burbidge, mathematics is a language unto itself. There is only right and wrong, and there is no room for error. The number I gave you is correct. Do you have any other figures for me to calculate?"

Lord Burbidge's expression turned sour and he looked down at his account book once more. "If you have 80 chickens, and they produce five eggs each over the course of the week, how many eggs do you have?"

This was ridiculous. "You'd have 400 eggs."

Lord Burbidge was shaking his head once again. "I went over these



numbers with my steward, twice. Surely, you don't expect me to believe that you are able to do that off the top of your head?"

"I can do that and more. What you're asking me is basic math. I am perfectly capable of geometry, calculus, probability."

And, of course, so much more, but he didn't say so, as that was enough to be going on if the questions he'd been asked so far were anything to go by.

Lord Burbidge looked angry, though Oliver didn't understand why. What he did understand was that he might not get this job if he didn't try harder to impress or appease the man. "May I see the ledger?" Oliver asked.

Lord Burbidge slid it over to him and Oliver turned it around and ran his finger down the numbers on the side and pointed out the discrepancies and threw out the correct numbers.

Off to one side, it appeared Lord Burbidge had tried to calculate how many rows of oats to plant in one field to feed a certain number of horses, and Oliver quickly calculated and told him the answer.

He continued on to the next page, easily doing all of the math in his head.

Lord Burbidge's anger started to fade and he began to look impressed, a reaction Oliver was much more familiar with.

"How are you able to do that?"

He didn't think the man wanted to hear about his good study habits through school so he simply said, "It's a talent I was born with."

"Hmm. All right, then, I think we can find something around here for you to do."

Lord Burbidge stood and held out his hand.

His first job interview, and he'd nailed it?

Oliver stood, smiled, and shook the other man's hand.

He'd never doubted it for a moment.



ALICE WAS busy cleaning for most of the day.

Mrs. Quinn stopped her at one point to tell her she was doing good work. "You've done much this day."

"Thank you, ma'am."

There was something in the housekeeper's gaze. "I need you to go downstairs and clean the dining room windows."

Alice didn't question it, but hurried downstairs and retrieved a bucket of soapy water and some cloths from the kitchen, said hello to Cook, and then went into the dining room.

Lady Burbidge was seated at the dining room table, busy with

correspondence and Alice curtsied. "My lady, I'm here to clean the windows."

"Be about your work," Lady Burbidge acknowledged her.

Alice could feel heat rising in her face and was ashamed that the other woman had caught her earlier with Lord Burbidge, but angry as well.

She set the bucket down and squeezed water out of a cloth, and started to clean, anxious that her mistress would see her working hard.

It was a beautiful house, and it was a pleasure to keep it clean. She loved beautiful things, and tried to think on that instead.

She could feel Lady Burbidge staring at her, and after a moment the woman said, "Alice, come here if you please."

Alice crossed to stand on the other side of the table from Lady Burbidge. "My lady."

"You and my husband were together earlier in the library with the doors closed, you must know that is unacceptable."

Alice didn't know what to say. They both knew it wasn't her doing, but if she spoke against her employer, she could lose her position. "Yes, my lady."

"I had much respect for your mother, and would even consider her a friend. Your father is a genius in the garden, and I wouldn't wish to lose him."

The implied threat sent a spike of fear through Alice. "My lady," she choked out, and could feel tears burning behind her eyes.

"What is it you want for yourself, my dear?"

Alice met her gaze. "What do you mean?"

"Are you planning to work for us for the rest of your life?"

"I ... I hope to marry someday and have children."

Why Mr. Graham would pop into her head at that moment, was beyond her. She'd only met him the one time.

"You know, most men wish for a chaste wife, a lady. One who's not been with another."

Alice could feel her face heating all over again. This was a nightmare conversation. "As I've never been with anyone, I'm sure my husband, whoever he might be, will be well pleased."

Lady Burbidge continued to watch her. "All right, just don't get any ideas above your station. Regardless of your mother's family, I've no doubt you will marry a servant, like yourself."

She thought of Oliver again. "Of course, my lady."

Lady Burbidge nodded. "All right, back to work."

As she cleaned windows, she tried to keep her expression blank so the resentment burning within her didn't show.

The lady had a scoundrel for a husband.

Alice had done nothing to encourage him.

It just wasn't fair.

She thought of the conversation she'd had with her father earlier in the day and a small spark of hope lifted her heart. Mr. Graham was the first man she'd ever been interested in. Did that mean something?

Had the Lord answered her prayers? Had she finally met a man she might wish to marry?

And if so, how did she go about capturing his attention?

Her entire adult life, she'd been treated like a flirt. The truth was, she went out of her way to avoid men, and their attentions, so she was less experienced than her peers.

She might have to ask for advice.

Might Mr. Graham be considered above her station? He was dressed quite oddly, but in quality clothing. His accent set him apart as well.

Perhaps his situation was similar to her own and he was raised by a mother who'd been used to finer things.

So many questions, she'd have to wait and see.

She finished her work silently, and left the room.

She need not get ahead of herself. First, he needed to stay. And second, he needed to be a good and decent man.

Ha! What were the chances?

As things never seemed to go her way, why was she wasting her time worrying about it?

## Chapter 6

Where was Alice?

The next day, Oliver let himself into the house and stopped, unsure where to go.

The previous day he'd been assigned a room in the servants' quarters, out behind the stables, and he'd had a chance to clean up.

Afterward, he'd been led to the study to have a talk with Lord Burbidge and his steward, Mr. Esterford. They'd made a go at getting the books back into shape.

Which was a joke, in and of itself.

He should've kept his mouth shut, because once he'd started, he'd seen numerous ways to improve the estate. Who knew he was such a show off?

As ever, Oliver thought in terms of business. So, he'd sat with the two men, and explained how they might make improvements on many levels: running their farming ventures, investing, making improvements to the properties so they could invest in more stock, farming equipment, and utilization of the property.

His hand ached from writing out the detailed business plans. With ink and quill! Fortunately, he'd had a little practice as they'd used them in a class project at Eton.

Lord Burbidge had been incredibly excited, and had complimented Oliver on his bold and neat hand.

He was certainly glad to help, and he did need the paycheck for the moment, but he was incredibly frustrated that he hadn't had so much as a glimpse of Alice.

Where was she?

He went into breakfast, and stopped short at the dining room door as he realized he wasn't sure where he was supposed to go.

Did he eat in the dining room with the family?

All his life he'd been invited to the best tables, whether it be in the finest restaurants, or in people's homes.

It would never have occurred to him to go around back to eat with the servants, but as he stood there, he realized that's exactly what he should have done, because that was where Alice might be found.

He backed out of the doorway, but left it too late.

“Oliver! Come in, come in, lad,” Lord Burbidge issued the invitation in a boisterous voice.

It looked like the man was still in a good mood after yesterday’s business meeting.

One by one, he introduced Oliver to his family. His wife, daughter, the twins, and his parents.

Lord Burbidge must have been talking him up, because everyone seemed very interested in meeting him.

He was still regretting his foray into the room when *she* came in.

Alice was carrying a tray of food over to the sideboard, and she shot him a glance and a smile, and something inside him seemed to relax.

He couldn’t help follow her with his gaze.

Lord Burbidge was quick to pull his attention away. “Oliver, tell my father about the way we are going to expand our planting season to make it more profitable.”

Oliver obliged, but when he glanced at Alice again, Lord Burbidge offered him a chair facing the windows.

“Alice, make Mr. Graham a plate, will you?”

He couldn’t exactly crane his neck to look at her, though he could feel her there.

He kept hoping for a glimpse of her as the conversation around him continued.

“I can’t wait to introduce him to everyone. He is going to make us a bundle of money!”

Why did he suddenly feel like a trained monkey?

Lady Burbidge nodded at Oliver and smiled at her husband. “I’m so glad to hear it’s working out, my dear.”

Lady Pamela, seated to his right, turned toward him. “And where are you from, Mr. Graham?”

Alice set a plate in front of Oliver, and he gave her a grateful smile. “Thank you,” he said, before answering. “I’m from London.”

“Oh, I do love London.” Lady Pamela said. “Why have I not seen you there before?”

That amused Oliver more than it should. “I live rather quietly.”

“Most likely, the gentleman prefers to study,” Lord Burbidge said. “He’s really quite brilliant.”

“Thank you,” Oliver said.

“But surely I should have seen you about?” Lady Pamela persisted. “Do you not attend any parties?”

In case she was digging to find out if he had money, and was worth her time, he decided to put it bluntly. “I’m afraid that poor, destitute students such as myself don’t get invited anywhere very

often.”

It was certainly true at the moment, anyway.

Apparently, it was exactly the right thing to say because Lady Pamela applied herself to her breakfast.

“Have you been employed elsewhere?” Lord Norrington asked.

Circumstances being what they were, he said, “I’ve worked with Lord Wickham in Scotland. He was quite impressed by my ability to make money.”

That last was true enough, anyway.

“Why did you leave there?” Lady Norrington asked.

“It was time for me to see a bit more of the world.”

“And our quiet little village is seeing more of the world?” Lady Burbidge asked with a smile.

He smiled back. “Well, my lady, I’ve already lived in London, and in the wilds of Scotland, so I decided to try something different. Besides, I like it here.” He couldn’t help but glance at Alice again.

“Well,” Lady Burbidge smiled. “We shall hope that you stay for a very long time.”

Seven more days to be exact.

Lord Burbidge said, “I’d like to introduce you to my bailiff, Mr. Reardon, sometime today.”

“Oh, you will like him,” Jeremy spoke up, or maybe it was Jonathan, there really was no telling them apart.

“I look forward to meeting him.”

The other twin slugged one hand into his fist. “He can take down a blighter quicker than anyone you’ve ever seen,” he said, admiration in his tone.

“A useful skill here in Staffordshire?” Oliver asked.

Lord Burbidge laughed, but his wife said, “Jonathan, please,” her tone admonishing. “Language.”

“Well, he can,” Jonathan insisted. “There is no one to gainsay him.”

Oliver noticed Lord Burbidge looking at Alice.

Oliver caught his gaze and the other man’s expression turned slightly sour.

Oliver was there to stop Alice’s murder, and it wasn’t much of a leap to see that Lord Burbidge had an interest in his young maid.

He glanced at Lady Burbidge who seemed to be watching them watch each other.

It was all so strange.

He applied himself to his breakfast. He wished that he could whisk Alice away from all of this right now. He’d like to get her out of there, sooner rather than later. He was quite confident that Wickham wouldn’t leave him there forever; Harry would hound him if he tried.

But seven days seemed like a long time.

“Watch this,” Lord Burbidge said. “Oliver, how much is  $263 \times 8$ ?”

Seriously? Oliver swallowed a bite of food and then said, “It is 2104.”

“And how much is  $5010 \times 16$ ?”

“It is 80160,” Oliver said stiffly.

“Did you see that, sons? Do you see why you need to apply yourself to mathematics? Oliver is a wonder and a marvel, and I can’t wait to see what we can do together.”

“Or I could just hire a clerk, like you,” Jonathan smirked.

His father gave him a repressive look.

“I’m surprised that Lord Wickham let you go.” Lady Burbidge persisted.

Oliver, numb with humiliation at being forced to perform, shrugged a shoulder. “He was sorry to see me go.”

In all his years, no one had ever dared to treat him thus. He’d always been in the enviable position of being the boy genius, and then a leading businessman.

He could ignore people when he wanted, answer only when he felt like it, and he’d never had to work for anyone before.

Was this what it was like?

In recent years, perhaps he’d become a bit spoiled, and perhaps people did kowtow to him a bit. But Lord Burbidge was ridiculous.

Oliver would love nothing better than to snatch Alice, and take her away from here until Wickham was ready to show up.

But Alice didn’t know him, and he didn’t have a dime to his name, so he had to put up with it whether he liked it or not.

Was this how other people felt?

There were also undercurrents going around, glances which he had no hope of deciphering, and, as usual, did not understand.

He suddenly wished Daphne were here to explain things to him.

He’d never felt quite this way before.

Completely cut loose.

He was never going to take his life for granted again.



ALICE WAS RELIEVED when breakfast was finally over.

Oliver tried to stay behind to talk to her, but Lord Burbidge insisted upon his presence.

She was finally able to clean up, and she picked up the first tray of food and headed into the kitchen. When she walked in, everyone looked up.

Cook, Fiona, and Ginny all started to speak at the same time, until

Cook held up her hand. "Whose kitchen is this, anyway?"

Everyone quieted and Cook asked, "And 'ow was breakfast this morning?"

Alice set the tray down and smiled. "As soon as I have cleaned up, I shall tell you all about it."

With a look from Cook, the other girls followed to help, and as fast as possible they carried everything back to the kitchen, and then hurried back to set the room to rights. Daniel followed them in.

Finally, when the kitchen door was shut again, Cook, who was dishing up breakfast for everyone said, "Well?"

Alice, slightly flushed from all the running around, shook her head and chuckled. "Lord Burbidge was in a wonderful mood this morn."

"Sit down, sit down," Cook said.

When they were all seated, Alice continued. "The new man, Mr. Oliver Graham, is very intelligent, good with numbers, and Lord Burbidge intends to make a lot of money using his ideas."

"Well, what do you think of that?" Cook asked, as she looked around at the others, astonishment in her expression.

Daniel swallowed some toast and said, "He and Lady Pamela spoke at the table for a bit, and I cannot help but think that there might be a match in the making."

Something dark and bitter twisted in Alice's chest and she was quick to look down at her plate.

"Really?" Cook seemed well pleased with the information.

Alice had seen the way Oliver had glanced in *her* direction. And, after all, he was an employee, a paid worker, the same as she. Why not her?

For the first time in a long while she'd felt pleased that a man had noticed her. Usually when that happened, it only meant trouble.

But when Lady Pamela had expressed an interest, that glow of happiness had slowly faded.

It seemed as if Alice was destined for a life where nothing went her way.

But, rather than feel sorry for herself, and with everyone looking at her and hoping for more, she didn't want to disappoint, so she smiled brightly. "He is very well favored."

Cook rolled her eyes and scoffed. "Do you think I do not 'ave eyes in my 'ead? I can see that well enough for myself."

"I might feel sorry for Mr. Graham," Alice continued, "because Lord Burbidge obviously has very high expectations of him. But in this case, I actually feel that Lord Burbidge may have the right of it."

"Well, isn't that something?" Cook looked fascinated.

Daniel reached for more potatoes. "He doesn't seem intimidated in the least by Lord Burbidge, and is quick to correct him."



Cook nodded sagely. "He must be from money himself, then."

Alice shrugged. "He claims to be penniless, but good breeding does show."

"Isn't that the truth?" Cook said. "Your mother was much the same way."

Alice smiled, acknowledging her words with a nod.

Cook took a bite of a roll, "What else?"

Alice shook her head. "I don't know how to explain it, but Mr. Graham really does seem like something special. He's quite talented with numbers."

Cook snorted. "Methinks our little Alice might 'ave found someone who has finally caught her eye?"

Fiery heat bloomed in Alice's face. "Tis not true in the least."

Cook, watching her, burst out laughing. "You see that?" she lifted the cup in her hand and waved it at the others. "Alice has finally been bitten by loves curse."

Alice pressed her hands to her face which caused everyone to start laughing.

Mrs. Quinn came into the kitchen. "What is going on in here?"

Cook, still smiling, said, "Oh, 'tis nothing. Little Alice 'ere was amusing us with tales of her father's courtship of her mother. Can you imagine that old gardener courting a wife that was once as lovely as Alice?" She shook her head. "It must have been quite amusing."

Gratitude swelled within Alice. Mrs. Quinn would have been angry to hear Alice sharing gossip, and Cook had covered for her quite nicely.

Mrs. Quinn finally relaxed her stance. "Well, then, carry on. Finish your breakfast and get back to work."

"Yes, ma'am," Cook said.

With one last glance at them, the housekeeper left the room.

Cook winked at Alice. "Well, my dear, we shall see how this plays out."

Alice shook her head. "I shall tell you how it plays out. Somehow, I'll be in trouble yet again, for something not my fault."

Cook made a sympathetic noise. "Someone as pretty as you needs to be married with a babe on your hip. That will shut you up quite nicely. And clear the field for some of the other young ladies around here."

Alice suddenly pictured Oliver at her side, his babe on her hip. Was she losing her mind?

Oliver was not for her.

Girls like her did not marry men like Oliver. He was obviously destined for great things. Perhaps a marriage to Lady Pamela?

He was fair of feature, intelligent, and no doubt ambitious.

If he was looking in Alice's direction, it was probably with dishonorable intentions and, as always, she wanted no part of that.

She needed to take her mind off Oliver, and find someone she could truly marry and make a life with.

She just wished that her choices weren't so limited.

If she knew of someone she thought she could fall in love with, or at least deal well with, she'd have already been married.

She said a silent prayer to Saint Francis for patience, then stood and did what she always did.

She returned to work.



THE FIRST CHANCE OLIVER HAD, he took a break, deciding to walk around the property for a bit.

The moment he was outside, the little mutt, apparently waiting for him, attached himself once more, walking at Oliver's side. "Hello, you little stalker."

When he rounded the manor, he ran into the very person he most wanted to see.

"Hello!" he called out to Alice.

She turned, saw him, and stopped and waited.

"Good morning," he said, when he reached her.

"Good morrow," she responded.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm headed to the vegetable garden to do some weeding and gather some vegetables." She lifted a pail. "And you?"

Oliver wasn't going to tell her he simply needed a break from Lord Burbidge, and, after a glance at the dog sitting at his feet, he said, "I am hoping to hunt down a bucket so I can wash this little guy."

Alice looked down at the little dog. "He is awfully dirty."

"He is."

Alice glanced up at him, and for the first time, her gaze was more direct. "I suppose we will have to do something about that."

Oliver couldn't help but smile at her matter-of-fact tone. "I'm game if you are."

"You wait here, and I will return with some soap and a bucket of water."

As Alice walked away, Oliver smiled down at the little dog. "It looks to me like you are going to be a lot more helpful than I'd originally thought."

The dog looked up at him, and then away, panting, and seeming to smile as if he knew something that Oliver didn't.

When Alice returned, Oliver was quick to meet her halfway, and

take the large bucket of water from her. Then he followed Alice, and the dog followed him, and when they were out of sight of the house, Alice knelt down and called the animal to her.

“You want to do the honors, or should I?” she asked.

She was already rolling up her sleeves, Oliver wasn’t going to make any points by being a layabout, so he quickly did the same.

Dapple tried to slink away when Alice carefully poured some water on him, and Oliver kept him in place. As soon as he was wet, Alice soaped him with the bar of soap, and expertly started to scrub him.

Oliver tried to help her as best he could, but mostly he kept the dog from running off.

They rinsed and soaped the dog twice more, and the poor little animal was growling his displeasure by the time Alice decided he was clean enough for a last rinse.

After they’d finished washing the dog, Alice dried him with the cloth, and the little animal turned out to be a white dog with spots on its flanks.

“There now,” she said. “That feels better, doesn’t it?”

Dapple responded to her tone, and let her finish rubbing him down from snout to tail.

When she released him, he walked a few feet away and shook himself, showing his disapproval with a stiff-legged walk.

They both got a chuckle out of that and Alice said, “I see why you have him. He really is a darling little thing, is he not?”

There was no way Oliver was going to tell her the mutt wasn’t his, not if she approved, and he simply made a noise of agreement.

From the looks of things, he now owned a dog.

## Chapter 7

*M*rs. Quinn found Alice polishing the chairs in the dining room a short while later. “Lady Burbidge would like to see you.”

Alice was quick to run up the stairs and found Lady Burbidge in her bedchamber.

She was doing needlework in a large, comfortable chair on the other side of the fourposter with its masked curtains. Earlier, Alice had straightened thick wool blankets and covered the bed in a white cotton decorative counterpane.

She walked across the carpeted floor and gave a quick curtsy. “My lady?”

“I would like you to run to the village and pick up the dress Mrs. Starr has promised me. She said it would be ready today, and I’m going to want it for the dinner I’m attending.”

“Right away, my lady.”

Excitement rose within her as she turned away only to be stopped once again. “Why don’t you take Mr. Graham with you?”

Alice felt an odd little thrill through her. “Ma’am?”

“He’s new here, I think you should help him acclimate. There’s a good girl, no need to rush, and mind you don’t drop the dress.”

“Yes, my lady.”

A walk to the village was a treat, and the thought of approaching Mr. Graham had her heart tripping in her chest.

She wasn’t even sure where to find him, but she headed to the study and tapped on the door.

“Come in.”

She was surprised to find Mr. Graham alone. Suddenly tongue-tied, she said in a rush. “Mr. Graham, I am headed to the village if you would like to accompany me? Lady Burbidge thought you should like to look around? If you’re busy, perhaps another time?”

His face lit with surprise and excitement. “I’d love to go. Thank you.” His enthusiasm had her smiling back at him.

“I was planning to go now, if that’s acceptable?”

He rounded the desk with gratifying speed, and moved into the foyer and opened the front door. “After you, Miss Munro.”

“Oh,” she pressed her hand to her heart. “My goodness, thank you.”

She moved through the doorway, surprised and delighted by his zeal.



THIS COULDN'T HAVE WORKED out better if Oliver had planned it himself.

He was just starting to wonder if he was going to be stuck in Lord Burbidge's study the entire time he was here, when the man had excused himself saying he had other things to do.

Frankly, Lord Burbidge's properties and investments were quite simple and easy to follow. It was also easy to see where the man was falling down and letting things slip through the cracks.

Oliver had made several suggestions that Lord Burbidge thought were genius ideas, but Oliver suspected the man was getting overwhelmed. When he'd excused himself, that had been fine by Oliver.

And now, he was exactly where he wanted to be.

As they followed the gravel drive to the main road in the distance, Dapple following behind them, he was very aware of Alice at his side, and other than a few glances thrown her way, he kept his gaze down, so he didn't stare.

“It's a beautiful place,” he said. “You said you've been here your whole life?”

“All that I remember, anyway.”

Oliver thought of the research he'd had done, trying to find out more about this girl, only to come up blank. Now, she was here before him, and he couldn't think of a thing to say.

For the most part, her gaze was also firmly on the ground, with an occasional shy glance his way.

He was starting to regret his lack of effort where women were concerned, because he was struggling to find a way to charm Alice. “It's a nice day today.”

“It is,” she agreed.

“I love the blue skies, and the green grass, and everything.”

She started to laugh, and then cut herself off with a hand to her mouth.

He smiled. “I'll admit I'm a little awkward when it comes to talking to ladies.”

“That's all right, I suppose I'll have to manage.”

He laughed, so used to flattery, that her gentle teasing was a surprise. “Tell me about your life here.”

"I've already revealed the whole of it."

"I know it all, do I?"

She laughed again, and he liked the sound of it, wanted more.

"Perhaps I want to know about you," she said.

"You do, do you? Why is that?"

"Honestly," she sent him a bashful look, "you probably shouldn't tell me anything. I am a terrible gossip."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "Oh, the revelation of a terrible flaw. I wouldn't have guessed that about you. It makes you less-than-perfect, which can only be a good thing, as I've so many faults myself."

She blushed. "I'm not the only one who is curious about you, and when questioned, I told all."

"So, I'd better watch what I say?"

"I suppose I could keep a secret, but you'd have to warn me up front that it was one."

He laughed again. "I'll keep that in mind. But far from being dissuaded, I find myself willing to tell you anything."

He was courting the girl, after all. And if he wasn't honest with her, how was he supposed to win her affections?

"All right, tell me more about yourself. You said your mother raised you?"

"She did. She is a wonderful person, intimidating to some, and a private woman. She can even surprise me at times. Recently I learned she was in love with a Scottish lad when she was young."

She smiled. "What happened?"

"As to that, I can't say. Perhaps if you meet her, you could dig her secrets out one by one, and then let me know."

She smiled. "I should have never told you that I gossip. I am convinced you will bring it up at the least opportune of occasions."

"Probably so."

"Do you have any other family?" she asked.

"A few cousins that I'm close to. I see them on most holidays, and they're a fun lot. What about you?"

She shook her head. "It's just me and my father."

They walked along, taking their time, walking through the picturesque countryside. They crossed over a bridge and started toward a village in the distance.

Walking beside Alice brought out a plethora of feelings. A sense of camaraderie, a sense of rightness.

"You said you did well in your schooling?" she asked.

"I did."

"My mother had tutors when she was a girl, but I did not have that luxury. Fortunately, she took the time to teach me to read and write

and do basic calculations. She taught me about geography, and told me of the places she'd been."

He could hear a yearning in her voice, and longed to tell her that he would travel the world with her if that was her wish.

This world, or perhaps it was the fact that Alice was in it, seemed fresh, and clean, and worth studying.

There were no phones, no electric lines. Nothing to draw the attention away from the moment. He felt more alive somehow. And walking beside Alice, with her bright blonde locks, creamy skin, and bright blue eyes ... she seemed such a part of it.

Would she take to her new life easily, or long for this place that ended up being so cruel to her in the end?

As they walked, he told her about an incident in school, where he was bullied, but eventually came out on top, because he made the better grade.

"You are stubborn and look to the long game?"

"Always."

He told her about Harry and Daphne. How he'd hoped to marry her, but that Harry had won the girl in the end.

They walked past farm houses in the distance, communal fields, and before they knew it, they were walking into the village.

It was bigger than he'd pictured; cottages, businesses, all clustered around a church.

"My mother is buried there," she indicated the graveyard outside the church.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Would you like to stop?"

She shook her head. "Perhaps another time."

There was a mill in the distance, and he spotted a couple of pubs.

It looked like a well-traveled route, and as they walked by a stall selling mostly vegetables, there was a young girl selling flowers.

"A flower for your lady?" she asked.

His lack of funds hit him hard.

He didn't have a coin to his name and couldn't buy his lady something as simple as a flower.

He'd always been able to have anything he'd wanted, and was finding the sting of doing without quite unpleasant.

He shook his head at the girl and then glanced at Alice. "I'm sorry, if I had the money, I would buy you some flowers."

She grinned. "Truly, what a charmer you are. Perhaps if you had the money, you would buy me a horse and carriage, and perhaps even a castle?"

He laughed, her teasing tone making him feel more at ease. "Perhaps I would start with flowers, and a book or two."

In a week he would get her back home and offer her the world.

“Do not worry, my father often brings me flowers for the kitchen table. In fact, the lilac roses in the garden were grown in my honor.”

“Really? How wonderful.”

She blushed, and looked at the ground. Had she felt she was bragging? He didn’t know her well enough to tell, and oh, how he wanted to get to know her.

She glanced up. “A book however, now that would be most welcome.”

Flowers, meals, books, anything she could ever want he wanted to lay at her feet. If Lord Burbidge paid him while he was here, a book would be his first purchase.

He looked at her, and she looked back at him, and he felt such a moment of connection.

Gut-punched was the way Harry had once described meeting Daphne.

Oliver felt the same way.

Daphne had been right to refuse Oliver’s proposals. He’d seen for himself how attracted Daphne was to Harry and vice versa.

And now, looking at Alice, her smiles, her blushes, the way she spoke to him, all told him she was as attracted to him as he was to her.

Was he crazy to feel this way about someone so quickly? He didn’t think so. There was certainly something to work with here.

Alice was greeted by several people as they walked through the town, and everyone looked at him with curiosity.

They arrived at their destination, and Alice knocked on the door.

Oliver stood outside as she picked up the dress for Lady Burbidge, and then held it for her as they walked back through the village.

When he’d first met her, a wispy apparition, he’d felt a connection.

An hour in her company had cinched it.

This was the girl for him.



ALICE LOVED that Oliver was kind and gentle.

He wasn’t loud or obnoxious like some of the other boys who tried to catch her attention.

He was actually quite the gentleman.

She’d never felt this way about anyone before.

There seemed to be a connection between them.

She thought about the times other ladies had talked about falling in love. And she’d wanted to, wanted it for herself, and had felt like there was something wrong with her.

She’d been looked at, grabbed at, until she’d simply had it with



men.

Oliver seemed different.

She'd seen the way the other girls in the village had looked at him.

He hadn't even seemed to notice. He wasn't full of himself like other men tended to be, when they had many girls interested.

She wondered if Oliver would ditch her to go and get a drink, but then realized why he wouldn't. "I was surprised you did not go into the pub, but then remembered you don't have any coin."

"And miss walking with you? I don't think so. Besides, I'm not much of a drinker." He chuckled. "Or I should say I'm not much of a drinker when my friend Harry isn't around."

"No?"

"I'm more of a nerd."

"What does that mean?"

"I like numbers, I like to work, I like to create things."

"You remind me of my father. He likes to work, and create beauty. Though he doesn't like numbers."

Oliver laughed. "I've found that few people do."

She was surprised to find she'd relaxed completely in his presence. She'd been dealing with men since she was thirteen years old, men trying to grab her, kiss her, and Oliver hadn't done either.

And he'd been alone with her longer than many who'd tried.

She suddenly wondered if he wasn't attracted to her. The idea upset her, which, in turn, made her laugh at herself.

Oliver had her feeling dizzy and off balance.

Would she mind if he tried to kiss her? She found she quite liked the idea.

Perhaps she should be the one to try and kiss him?

The idea made her feel bold and powerful, and she had to stifle a fleeting grin. Was this why men tried their hand?

She loved that she felt comfortable in his presence and that she trusted him.

She wanted him to trust her too.

She walked along, simply enjoying the walk, and the man beside her.

Something had changed for her today, and it had changed for the better.

## Chapter 8

They were both taking their sweet time on their way back to the manor, Alice giving the dog a pat once in a while, and Oliver was enjoying every minute of it.

Oliver was trying not to stare again. "Tell me something else that I don't know about you."

"I plant medicinal plants, and try to learn everything I can about them."

"Really? That's fascinating. Have you ever treated anyone?"

"Quite often."

"How did that capture your interest?"

"Perhaps tis simply self-preservation so I can patch myself up," her smile was deprecatory, and he found it charming. "I seem to draw bad luck." She pulled back her sleeve and showed Oliver a scar on her forearm. "This is from when I tripped on the cellar stairs, and caught my arm on a nail."

He noted the scar but was fascinated by her smooth, soft-looking skin. Which was slightly hilarious. He came from a time when skin was on display anywhere he cared to look.

Alice showed her arm and he couldn't take his gaze away.

"I've another on my knee," she said.

He'd like to see that one too, he thought, but wasn't stupid enough to say it out loud.

"Mayhap I was simply born under an unlucky star."

"I'm sure that's not true."

"It seems so, sometimes. I am clumsy enough to injure myself at times. My mother died. And ..." she stopped there.

"Don't say that, it's not true."

She looked surprised at his objection. "Why should you care?"

He cared because her saying that was leaving him a bit spooked; because there seemed to be an element of truth to it.

He knew she was murdered. That this week she was murdered. So, yes, having her say something like that out loud, left him feeling disturbed.

He changed the subject. "You like to read?"

"I love to. Lady Burbidge used to lend my mother books."

"So, your nose is often in a book? And I'll have a hard time getting your attention upon me?"

She laughed. "I don't have much time to read, anymore. Mayhap a few minutes before bed and that's about it."

Oliver thought about his home, filled with books, about Burbidge manner, also filled with books, and about the fact that once he had her home, she could order any book she wanted to read instantly online.

He desperately wanted to change her world.

She could read all day if she wanted and he would let her read to her heart's content. He pictured her in his living room at home ... if he could just get her there.

"I could tell you about a story that I read in a book."

Her face lit instantly. "Tell me!"

"I know a story about a man who traveled through time to rescue a woman he met in a garden."

"And then what happened?"

Oliver started walking again, and she was quick to move beside him, her gaze firmly upon him, and it gave him a feeling of heady satisfaction.

"The man met a ghost in a garden, and fell instantly in love with her, and was determined to save her from her fate. His friend found him a witch, and he went back to get her."

She made a scoffing noise as she jumped up on a stone and balanced there. "How can you love someone that you do not even know?"

Oliver shrugged. "Perhaps it just happens. Perhaps when you meet the person that you're supposed to spend the rest of your life with, the rest of eternity with, you just know. It's like meeting your other half."

She stared at him. "That is a very pretty thought. In fact, I find that I like it very much."

Almost as if he was drawn against his will, he took a step forward.

They were staring at each other, face-to-face, and Oliver met her gaze, electrified.

He'd seen that expression before, every time Harry and Daphne looked at each other for longer than a few moments, and now it was happening to him.

There was no way he was not going to enjoy every second of it. She moved first, leaning slightly toward him, and he took another half step forward until there was barely any space between them, then he closed the distance and his mouth caught hers and he kissed her.

Her mouth was warm, soft as silk, and he raised his hands to cup her elbows, to pull her closer. His mouth moved on hers with

tenderness, and he had the thought to end the kiss, to keep it sweet and light between them. But he couldn't seem to pull himself away from the lush pressure of her body leaning into his.

She was the first to break away, and her face was flushed, and she was breathing fast, which made him realize he was breathing fast, too.

He smiled at her, and when she smiled back, it was Christmas morning, the one where he'd been given his first computer and didn't care what was in any of the other gifts at that point.

Christmas morning, his favorite vacation, the day he'd signed the paperwork for his first business, all those feelings were right there, front and center, with all of the other good things that had happened in his life.

Alice gave a nervous laugh, took a breath, and then let him go, jumped off the stone and started walking.

He was quick to catch up, and somehow was still holding Lady Burbidge's dress over his arm.

He suddenly realized that Alice knew he didn't have a coin to his name, and he found that he really liked that.

She'd kissed him back because she'd wanted to.

Not based on what he had, or what he could give her. He thought that he couldn't get any happier, but felt like he was walking on clouds.

They were slightly tongue-tied for a while, until Oliver mentioned the weather once more, and they both laughed.

Finally daring to glance at her, he realized he'd been wrong.

Alice was better than his first computer.



HER FATHER WAS THERE when they returned. "Hello, dandelion, where have you been?"

"We walked to the village, to fetch Lady Burbidge's dress," Alice said.

Her father was looking pointedly at Oliver and she could feel her face heating. Could her father tell she'd been kissed?

"Father, this is Mr. Oliver Graham," she said it breathlessly, and perhaps that's what made her father smile as he offered his hand to the other man.

"I am George Munro."

Alice blushed again, realizing she had not introduced her father.

The two men shook hands, "It's nice to meet you, sir," Oliver said.

"And you." She could tell that her father liked Oliver. "I heard that Lord Burbidge hired himself another man, and here I find you, walking with my daughter. Tell me about yourself."

Oliver stood straight and tall, and oddly, she found herself feeling proud of him as he looked her father in the eye.

"I'm from London, and I'm good with numbers. I have a recommendation from Lord Wickham up in Scotland, and am here to straighten out Lord Burbidge's affairs."

"How long do you plan to stay?"

"As long as it takes to get the job done."

Her father nodded as if Oliver had given an acceptable answer, but it was one that left her frustrated.

Did that mean he planned to leave at some point?

Her father looked between the two of them. "After you straighten out Lord Burbidge's affairs, will you be on your way? Do you have future employment lined up?"

Her father was asking Oliver what his prospects were, and Alice could feel herself flush, but at the same time, she was glad of the question.

It was one a father might ask of a suitor.

"Mr. Graham? I need to talk to you about somefing."

The three of them turned to see Mr. Reardon beckoning Oliver over.

Alice immediately felt herself closing off, and looking down.

Mr. Reardon scared her, and she always did her best not to look right at him.

"I'll be right there!"

Oliver lifted the dress, still hung over one arm. "Do you want me to take this inside?"

"Oh." She'd forgotten all about it. "Here, let me take it," she said, and carefully slid her arm underneath the dress and took it, and the heaviness of the dress made her realize he'd relieved her of a burden. "Thank you for carrying it."

"Anytime." With a smile, he bid them good day, and left to join Mr. Reardon.

"I like him," her father said. "Are you thinking he might make a good potential spouse for you?" He smiled, teasing. "That was fast."

"No, nothing like that," she said, but could feel herself blushing once again. "I have to take Lady Burbidge's dress to her."

"Then you'd best get going."

With a smile, she walked up the green.



WHEN OLIVER REACHED the other man, he introduced himself. "Hello, Mr. Reardon, I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to meet you yet," he held out his hand, "Oliver Graham."

The other man squeezed his hand a little too tightly, and it surprised Oliver into yanking his away.

He gave the other man a sharp glance. He was used to being around big men; Harry, his other bodyguard, Steve Sutton. This man would be their equal in size.

He had dark hair, a big nose, and a broad face. He didn't want to judge the other man, but his small eyes, and his large, slightly twisted lips, gave him a look of cruelty.

"Come wit' me, I wants to show you somefing."

Feeling slightly on edge, Oliver followed the other man into the stables. He'd not had a chance to look over the horses yet, and was glad for the opportunity.

When they rounded the corner, Reardon pivoted and slugged him hard in the gut.

It was so unexpected that the breath was knocked out of Oliver, and he fell backward onto the ground, his entire body stunned into immobility.

Dapple went crazy, barking at Reardon and snapping at his ankles.

Reardon pulled back a booted foot and kicked at the dog, but the animal was too fast and darted away, and when he neared Oliver, Oliver was quick to pull him close, to protect the fierce little protector.

Dapple licked his face, growled at Reardon, and then licked Oliver again, sniffing at his neck as if assuring himself that Oliver was all right.

He lay in the dirt and the hay, trying to get his breath back, both his arms wrapped around his stomach protectively.

Harry certainly hadn't taught him what to do in a case like this.

Oliver slowly regained his senses, as Reardon leaned against a stable wall and picked at his fingernails.

Finally, Oliver was able to sit up and asked, "Why did you do that?" in a voice that did not sound like his own.

He thought of the knife he had strapped to his ankle, and wanted to slide it out and gut the other man, but his confidence was badly shaken, and he felt too sick to act upon it.

Besides, his brain was starting to think again, and as he wasn't in any immediate danger, he didn't do anything. Let the other man think he was weak, and he could surprise him another time.

"That, my lad, was to let ye know to stay away from Alice. She belongs to Lord Burbidge, and is no' to be trifled wiv'."

"What do you mean she belongs to Burbidge? Burbidge is married." Oliver's voice was hoarse, and he was still trying to grasp that this had actually happened.

All of the training that Harry had given him was for nothing

against the brute force of this man. He'd heard of men dying from one hit, usually to the head, and could only feel grateful that the behemoth hadn't struck him there.

Still, his stomach hurt badly enough that he had to wonder if his internal organs had been somewhat shaken loose and rearranged.

He slowly rose to his feet to face the other man.

"Burbidge may be married, but that's nofing to do wiv you. Alice is no concern of yours." Reardon gave him a scornful look and then sauntered away.

Oliver stayed where he was for another ten minutes, getting his breath back, leaning against the stable wall, all the while fighting feelings of anger and shame.

He'd been wondering who'd murdered Alice, and had searched for any sign of it since he'd been here, Burbidge being his number one suspect.

He now had two suspects.

If Alice suffered a blow like that, he was quite sure it would kill her.

As helpless as he felt, he was grateful for the training Harry had given him, or that blow might have harmed and demoralized him even more than it had.

Finding out that Burbidge was some sort of stalker didn't surprise him. But he needed a hired gun to help? A pimp? The whole situation was nauseating.

The old lecher was twice her age and married to boot. Using his position to menace a young lady. Disgusting.

His feelings of helplessness faded, and left him with grim determination.

He would like to continue to romance Alice, but his main concern had to be getting her out of there.

Getting them both out of there.

"Wickham?" he called out. "You need to come and get us, sooner rather than later!"

A horse whinnied, and one of the stable hands, a short boy with a dark mop of hair, came around a stall and looked at him. "Are you wanting something, sir?"

Oliver pushed himself off the stable wall. "I do, but I don't think you'll be able to help me."

He slowly walked away, feeling better with each step.

He pushed back his doubts. Wickham would come for them, wouldn't he? Surely, Harry would make him? If not Harry, then Daphne would certainly have a thing or two to say. She could out-stubborn a rock.

Thoughts of his friends left him feeling better. There was no way

they would leave him here.

And, at least now, he knew who his enemies were.

It was time to plan, and if there was one thing he was good at, it was strategy.



## Chapter 9

Alice opened the kitchen door and went inside.

Cook glanced up. "Took your time, did you not?"

Ida and Ginny looked at her in curiosity. "Where did you go?" Ida asked.

"To the village to pick up a gown for Lady Burbidge. I must take it up to her."

She went through the kitchen and down the hall and was just about to climb the stairs when Lord Burbidge stopped her.

"Where have you been?"

The question, and his unexpected presence, scared the life out of her. "To the village, to pick up a dress."

He looked at the dress in her arms. "Who have you been with?"

Her face heated. "Mr. Graham walked with me and back."

"Did you allow him any liberties?"

That was none of his business, but he was scaring her, looking like he was about to lose his temper, and barely pulling himself back.

"You will stay away from Mr. Graham if you know what's good for you."

He was so menacing, that her breath caught in her chest, and her throat tightened.

Lady Burbidge appeared at the top of the stairs. "Alice, there you are. Did you get my dress?"

"I ... yes, my lady. I have it here," she said, and lifted her arm slightly.

Lady Burbidge gave her husband a long look, and then said, "Well, come upstairs, girl, don't keep me waiting."

Alice ran up the stairs, feeling as if Satan was nipping at her heels.

She followed Lady Burbidge down the hall to her room and once inside, Lady Burbidge instructed her to open the parcel.

Fingers trembling, Alice untied the bundle.

She lifted it up, and gave it a shake, and displayed it to Lady Burbidge.

"Oh! That looks very nice."

Alice's thoughts had been elsewhere, and she finally looked at the

gown. It was a high necked, blue grenadine, with tucks at the hem, and ornamental lace at the bodice. It would make a nice foil for Lady Burbidge's dark curls. "It's lovely, my lady."

"It is. It looks heavy. Was it a burden to carry?"

"Mr. Graham carried it for me."

Lady Burbidge's attention was off the dress and onto Alice. "Did you enjoy his company?"

Alice's cheeks heated yet again, and she feared she'd soon look like she had a permanent sunburn. "I did, he's a very nice gentleman."

"He does seem a promising lad."

He certainly did. Alice had enjoyed walking with him, talking with him, kissing him, though that now seemed a long time ago. Lord Burbidge's unprovoked attack had dampened her spirits, and her enjoyment of the day.

In fact, she felt slightly sick to her stomach.

As she hung the gown and helped Lady Burbidge examine it for wrinkles, she couldn't help but wonder what she was going to do.



THE NEXT MORNING had been spent at church in the village, and the rest of the day she'd worked as ever, and by evening, Alice had been able to avoid both Lord Burbidge and Oliver. She was still feeling shaken by what had happened, but with time and distance, she'd been able to relax.

She liked Oliver, and she didn't want to get him into any trouble for talking to her.

It had been easy enough to avoid both men, as the house was busier than usual, and they were getting ready to have the neighbors over for dinner.

Alice checked the dining room table once more, making sure that everything looked perfect. The plates, glasses, silverware, and napkins, were set beautifully. The best candelabra stood tall in the middle of the table.

The guests would be arriving within the hour, and Alice was in her best starched white apron.

Mrs. Quinn came in and said, "Why don't you go and get a bite to eat, as this is going to be a long evening. Mind you, stay neat and tidy."

Alice headed into the kitchen, glad to get a moment off her feet.

It smelled wonderful, with soup, meats, sauces, cheeses, potatoes and vegetables warming, or ready to serve on platters throughout the kitchen; desserts as well. She'd just taken a seat at the table with two of the girls, when Oliver came into the kitchen.

Immediately, the calm that she'd mustered throughout the day fled.

She could hardly look at him.

"Mr. Graham," Cook gave him a smile of welcome as she served bowls of soup to everyone. "Come in, come in. Are you ready for the dinner party?"

"As ready as I can be, as I've only the one outfit."

They all looked at his gray suit, vest and long pants, odd as they were, Alice was used to them now and thought he outshone every other man, regardless of station.

Cook laughed. "Ye know, we have been wondering about that. Were ye robbed on the road?"

"Something like that."

"Are ye 'ungry? Or waiting for the dinner party?"

He was looking at Alice. "I wouldn't say no to a bite to eat."

"Well, 'ave a seat there beside Alice, and I will serve you up."

Fiona and Ginny made way for Oliver, and they were all smiles.

"Ladies," he greeted them, and was obviously comfortable there, fitting in very easily.

"Will you be socializing tonight?" Ginny asked.

Oliver looked at the bowl of soup that Cook set before him. "Only if I'm forced to," he said, making everyone laugh.

He had an easy manner about him, and the look Oliver gave her was open, warm, and friendly, and she suddenly found herself feeling very bitter about Lord Burbidge.

As they ate, the other girls flirted with him, and it took her a moment to recognize that the coldness weighting her stomach was the bite of jealousy. Something she'd never felt before, for anyone.

Did this mean she was growing real feelings for Oliver?

The day before, spending time with him had been wonderful, and she would love to have a repeat.

Oliver sent her a few questioning glances, and she finally smiled at him, a real smile. Lord Burbidge wasn't in the kitchen, and he wouldn't come back here. She was unattached, as was Oliver, and there was no reason at all for her not to enjoy his company.

"Are you planning to stay in here and hide from the dinner party?" she teased him.

His face brightened, as if her comment thrilled him. "Is this where you will be?"

"Oh, heavens no, I'll be serving food and drinks."

"Just my luck," he said.

They were still smiling at each other when Mrs. Quinn came in the room. "Mr. Graham, Lord Burbidge is looking for you."

"Thank you," he said, but didn't jump up to comply as the rest of

them would.

Mrs. Quinn didn't seem to know how to react, and after a moment, she left the room again.

Despair suddenly hit her.

He was so different from the rest of them. A vital force, filled with energy and confidence. He seemed not quite a servant, but sort of in between, a step above the rest of them.

She tried to picture him wanting to marry her, and how that would work.

Both of them were dependent upon Lord Burbidge, and her life just felt like it wasn't her own.

It all lowered her spirits.

Oliver finished his soup, tossed back his drink, and then stood. "Ladies, I would love nothing more than to stay here with you, but duty calls," he gave them all a slight bow.

Cook shook her head. "Tis a shame you 'ave to leave us, but Lord Burbidge will want to show you off this evening."

Oliver laughed. "I'll try not to disappoint."

She watched him go.

Despite the kiss they'd shared, he obviously wasn't for her.



OLIVER HEADED down the corridor and could see that people were already starting to arrive.

A well-dressed crowd, they were standing around in the hall, dining room, and drawing room chatting.

He approached Lord Burbidge, and the other man welcomed him forward. "Oh, there you are! Come over here, if you will."

Oliver approached, unsmiling.

After he'd been attacked by Reardon the day before, he'd gone to work for Burbidge again, half expecting another attack, if only a verbal one.

Lord Burbidge had acted like nothing had happened, and they'd returned to work.

For the lack of remorse, Oliver had considered shifting the man's money around and stealing it, as well as taking some of his possessions to give him and Alice enough money to go on the run.

He could do it.

The only thing that stopped him was he didn't think Alice would go with him, and if they were caught in this place and time, it would not go well for them.

It was still an option, though in the end he'd decided he could wait six more days.

He'd spent the last two working, and randomly calling out to Wickham, but he'd had no luck in capturing the witch's attention so far.

He was starting to understand Harry's annoyance with the man.

Still, he believed in his friends and knew they would get them out of there eventually, which meant embezzlement and theft was out of the question.

Still, it made for a nice daydream.

When he saw Harry again, he was definitely going to talk to him about not going so easy anymore during their training.

He needed to know how to defend himself against sneak attacks and hulking giants as obviously, Harry couldn't always be there to protect him.

Oliver stopped beside Lord Burbidge and glanced at his guests, curiosity getting the better of him.

"I've recently hired this young gentleman. He is as bright as anyone I've ever come across, and you must hear his ideas for innovation."

And here it went.

Oliver had once watched a television show where a man had described how excruciatingly long it was to work at a job after giving two weeks-notice.

At the time, he'd scoffed at the thought of it.

Going forward he would have the utmost patience for anyone working out their notice.

Six more days of this seemed like a lifetime.

But he sucked it up, and at Lord Burbidge's urging, answered all questions. He soon was caught up in the conversation until he saw Alice walking around the room, serving drinks.

Lord Burbidge wanted to show some of the business plans Oliver had drawn up, and when the men went in the direction of the study, Oliver excused himself and stood beside the curtains out of the way.

Eventually, Alice made her way over to him. "May I offer you a drink?"

He took one. "You look lovely."

She glanced around as if worried someone would overhear, and anger welled within him to think she was worried about her married employer or his goon. If it was the last thing he did, he would get her out of there.

Lord Burbidge came out of his office, and Oliver met his gaze.

The other man grimaced and started toward them, but his wife intercepted him, took his arm, and held him at her side.

After another nasty look toward Oliver, he subsided.

Alice quickly moved on to serve others, and Oliver was left with a

hard knot in his stomach.

He didn't want to do anything that would harm Alice, and that included giving into his own stubbornness.

He took a few moments to simmer down, and then rejoined the group of men he'd been speaking with earlier.

The fact that they were all dead and gone in his time, gave him a sort of feeling of wonder and nostalgia.

Especially when he thought of Harry, who would fit into this much simpler time far easier than he.

"I say," one of the men, a Mr. Arnold, who'd not spoken as yet, lifted his glass to Oliver. "I understand Burbidge is interested in improvements to his property, but are you planning to stop there?"

Oliver was, because he wasn't planning to be there, but he couldn't say so. "Why do you ask?"

"Out in the country here, there are plenty of sheep, but also a bit of coal. Small-scale, and all that. We're still using waterwheels, windmills, and I've been wondering about investing in a steam driven piston engine. What are your thoughts?"

"It depends on how much coal you think you'll be able to mine. If it were me, I'd be much more interested in the business of canals."

"Canals?"

"Yes, getting products to market is going to be where the money is at in the near future."

He actually knew this for a fact.

The man's eyes brightened. "Interesting."

"I'm hearing some Scots in your voice," Oliver said. "I don't suppose you know any Crighton's?"

"I do."

"Did you know a Harry Crighton? He would have died in '46?"

The man looked pensive.

"Yes. Big guy, dark hair, brown eyes, and a bit of a temper?"

The man's lips curved. "You just described half the Crightons I know. But I can't say that I ever knew a Harry. Culloden Moor?"

"Yes."

"That was a dastardly business."

From the darkness in the man's tone, it wasn't a subject that he took lightly, and Oliver was sorry he'd brought it up. "My apologies, I should not have said anything."

"It's all right, but truth to tell, I'd rather talk about canals."

The men in the group laughed their agreement, and the conversation continued.

At one point, Oliver wondered what he was doing there.

In the Hollywood movies, he would have grabbed the girl by now, killed the bad guys, saved the day, and been on his way home.

At one point he glanced up to see Mr. Reardon, at the end of the hallway, looking at him, and a real sense of unease ran through him.

At dinner, he was seated next to Lady Pamela, and she seemed a little more impressed with him than the last time. She was smiling and simpering and there was nothing he could do about it.

It was agony that with Alice watching the whole thing, he felt like he was cheating on her.

Yes, he simply wanted to save the girl and get out of there.

He was eager for the evening to be over, and eager to go to bed, so he could count off yet another day.

## Chapter 10

When Oliver woke the next day, it was to a knock on his door, and when he answered, it was to find the footman — a good-looking young man Oliver had seen around the manor — with a new set of clothes in his hands. “Lord Burbidge sends these with his compliments.”

Oliver took the clothes, glad to have something else to wear. “Thank you.”

The young man nodded, walked off, and Oliver quickly used the basin of water and bar of soap to wash up, and then he dressed in his new clothing.

He glanced at Dapple, still curled up on the bed. Oliver could not begrudge him the comfortable spot. Besides, he didn’t stink anymore, and he probably smelled better than Oliver. At least he’d had a full scrub down. Oliver had to make do with a pitcher and basin and a washcloth. The dog didn’t seem to mind.

The overlong brown jacket was all right. The puffy sleeved white shirt was fine. But the baggy long underwear, and brown cotton breeches that ended at the knee were sort of cringeworthy. As were the stockings with ties at the top.

He wouldn’t have even worn this get-up for Halloween back in his time.

Still, he was glad to wear something clean.

And, as a bonus, he’d fit in. The quality was not as good as what Lord Burbidge wore, and that was a plus in his book. In fact, his new outfit would let him fit in as a servant, and he would be relegated to the kitchen, along with the rest of the staff.

More time with Alice! Brilliant!

He smiled, liking that idea just fine.

As it was a warm day, he ditched the jacket, and his ankle sheath didn’t look so good with the stockings, so he added his belt to the outfit so he could sheath his knife at his back, and then he was on his way.

He spent the morning with Lord Burbidge and his steward in the study, and Mr. Reardon had brought in workers to implement some of



Oliver's plans, and he'd had to spend a couple of hours outlining exactly how to go about it.

They'd wanted him on the worksite, but Oliver insisted he was an ideas man, and Lord Burbidge, in a very good mood, had told him to take a break, and they'd meet up later in the afternoon.

He checked the kitchen, but Alice wasn't in there, and he headed outside to see if he could find her or her father.

On his way past the stables, he came to the corral to find two boys play-fighting with sticks. Two horses pushed against the fence, obviously trying to get out of the way, and Oliver jumped up on the lower rung of the fence and gave one horse a pat.

"Who taught you boys to fight like that?" he asked.

The boys stopped, sticks drooping, and looked at him. "No one taught us anything," said the taller boy. "We are figuring it out for ourselves."

"Would you like me to give you a few pointers?" he asked.

Both of their young faces lit, and they quickly agreed.



ALICE HAD BEEN SENT to the medicinal gardens to get some weeding done and when she passed the corral, it was to see Oliver, in a new set of clothing, training two of the stable boys.

They had wooden sticks, and Oliver was teaching them how to hold their arms.

Her heart seemed to swell in her chest as just the sight of him affected her.

She was far too impressed with the man.

Oliver noticed her, and she turned and walked away, and it didn't take him but a moment to effortlessly jump the fence and catch up with her as the boys called out protests at his desertion.

Excitement made her pulse quicken. "We shouldn't be seen together."

Oliver took her arm and gently pulled her to a stop. "Why shouldn't we? We're both single and unattached. Did someone warn you off? Hurt you?"

He looked angry at the thought of it and his protectiveness made her heart beat faster. "Alice?" he demanded an answer.

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

She started walking again, and he kept pace. The air was thick with something, a tension between them, a ripple of awareness, a feeling she'd never felt with anyone else.

Usually, she tried to shrug off male company, and be about her business, but with Oliver, she just ... she just felt too much. She

wanted to be near him, talk to him, look at him, and see his smile.

"I could teach you to defend yourself," he said.

"The way you were teaching the boys?" she asked. "I think others might notice if I was carrying a stick around all day."

He laughed. "Maybe, but I do know some hand-to-hand combat, so I could teach you a thing or two."

"Hand-to-hand combat?" She tested the words. They were now hidden from the house by the other side of a ledge, and so she stopped, glanced around, and when she didn't see anyone, she lifted her chin. "All right, teach me."

He grinned, as if she'd given him the best answer in the world. "Gladly."



EVER SINCE REARDON'S attack on him, Oliver had considered what he would do differently.

The man was a snake, without honor, and hadn't fought him fairly.

In fact, he could've killed Oliver while he was down, had that been his intention.

Oliver had spent considerable time going over the fight in his mind. He was sure Harry would want to hear all about it, and Oliver wanted pointers on how to defend himself if something like that ever happened again.

He stood facing Alice and said, "Give me your hand."

She hesitated, then slowly held it out. He gently took her hand in his and a strange shock of awareness swept up and down his body.

Her hand was small, slightly callused, and having it nestled in his bigger one had his heartbeat speeding, and unable to help himself, he squeezed gently.

Her color heightened, and her breath caught, and those small reactions did something to him. He'd like nothing more than to pull her forward, into his arms, but instead, he cleared his throat.

"All right, for someone your size, your best bet when faced with an enemy —"

"An enemy?"

"An enemy, an attacker," he said decisively and reluctantly released her hand. "Your best bet is to run away. If that doesn't work, a blow to the nose using the heel of your hand works great." He fake demonstrated, not quite touching her nose.

"A boxing of the ears," he fake demonstrated on her again, not quite touching her hair, "and stomping on the tops of feet, or a kick to the privates might give you enough time to ..." he waited.

"To run away," she said softly.

He smiled, loving that he'd teased another blush from her. "That's right."

He picked up her hand again. "All right, I want you to make your hand stiff, like a piece of wood."

She did so and he took a step closer to her, and had to concentrate on the lesson as he'd much rather pull her close and kiss her.

"All right. I want you to feel my neck." With his free hand he showed her with two fingers, "This is my trachea. On either side are my sternocleidomastoid muscles." Again, he demonstrated. "Now, I don't want you to actually do this, but if you pull your arm back and chop an attacker right there, between those two, it could cause momentary unconsciousness, or loss of motor control in most people."

"What?" she asked, pulling back and pulling her hand free.

"If someone is attacking you, stiffen your hand and chop them in between the front and side of the throat. Can you remember that?"

"I'm going to have a hard time forgetting it."

Oliver knew he was showing off a bit, and trying to impress her. Knowing that didn't change anything, however, as he very badly did want to impress her.

"Poking someone sharply in the eye with a finger can cause temporary blindness," he continued. "You can always kick kneecaps, hit temples, you always want to think in terms of soft tissue and joints."

"Stop!" She smiled, then looking genuinely amused, she laughed. "Please stop! I think I would much rather carry a stick around."

He grinned at her. "That could work, but it might interfere with your duties. Here, let me show you one last thing." He grabbed hold of her wrist in a loose, yet unbreakable circle. "Try to get away."

She pulled, and couldn't break his grip.

"All right. Now, what you want to do is fist your hand, yes, just like that. Now place your other hand over the top of the fist, and then wrench your wrist away, using both hands."

She did so, easily, and looked astonished. She offered her wrist. "Do it again."

He grabbed hold of her wrist, and again, she wrenched it away, and smiled. "That is a fine trick."

"Stick with me, and I'll teach you all sorts of things."

"Like what?"

He glanced at her mouth, then caught himself. He didn't want to ruin this by pressing her for kisses. Instead, he said, "I have a knife." He pulled it from where he'd tucked it against his spine, and the blade caught the sunlight.

"My goodness," she said.

"Would you like it? I can strap it to your ankle lickety-split."

“No,” she said weakly. “That is all right, you keep it.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am sure.”

“All right.” He tucked it back into the sheath, and pulled his vest over it. “Then that concludes our lesson for today.”

They were facing each other, and he was so taken with her, standing there, looking pretty as a picture, that he could hardly stand it.

He’d heard the term lovesick before, and thought it might apply here.

She stood before him, unmoving, and he couldn’t resist. He slowly bent down, giving her a chance to reject him, and when she didn’t, he kissed her.

## Chapter 11

Mrs. Quinn set Alice to work in the butler's pantry, organizing and cleaning shelves.

It gave her plenty of time to think about Oliver: his strength, his kisses, the way he made her feel. She found herself humming, happy, and hopeful.

After about an hour, Mrs. Quinn came in and gave her a considering look. "Lady Burbidge has asked to see you. Go wash your hands and change your apron."

Alice hurried to the kitchen and did as she was told.

Mrs. Quinn followed, and though Cook, busy at the stove, didn't say anything, she looked curious.

The housekeeper held open the door as she walked past her and down the hallway. When they reached the staircase, Alice looked around, unsure where to go.

"Wait here, I will return shortly." Mrs. Quinn went upstairs and, a few minutes later, stood on the upper balcony and waved her up.

Alice quickly climbed the stairs and was led to Lady Burbidge's room. She was inside with her daughter, both seated, chairs close together, embroidering.

"Your ladyship," Mrs. Quinn said. "I have Alice here."

"Thank you, you're excused."

Mrs. Quinn left, and Alice stood in the doorway with her hands clasped, and waited.

"Alice, how are you today?"

"I am very well, my lady."

Lady Burbidge stopped what she was doing and looked at her for a long moment and something, a look of pain, or perhaps torment flashed across her face. "Come in, and sit down," she indicated the bench in front of the dressing table, and Alice quickly did as she was bid.

"Pamela, we'll take this up again later."

Lady Pamela looked between the two of them, and then silently left the room.

When she was gone, Lady Burbidge sighed. "You know, Alice, you

truly are beautiful. But, beauty fades, weathering like flowers in the garden, and rather more quickly than you might think.”

Alice felt bitter tears welling in her eyes as she met the other lady’s gaze. “And that will be a blessing, my lady.”

They stared at each other for a long moment and Lady Burbidge seemed to be taking her measure. Finally, she said, “I would like to train you as a lady’s maid. Of course, I already have Fiona, and you will train under her.”

Alice’s eyes widened in shock. “Truly?”

A shadow of sadness fell over the other woman’s face. “Yes, I probably should have done this sooner.” She straightened in her seat, her expression smoothing. “I think you’ll do a very good job.”

“Oh, my lady, I will. Thank you, thank you very much.”

“Fiona, come in here, will you?”

Fiona came in from the dressing room as Lady Burbidge stood. “Fiona, if you will take her in hand?”

“Of course, my lady,” Fiona said.

Lady Burbidge left the room, and left the two girls staring at each other. “Lady Burbidge would like to keep you close, as there are too many eyes wandering in your direction.”

In a moment, all of Alice’s joy fled.

“Now, now, none of that,” Fiona said. “You must simply be grateful for your rise in station and the safety it provides.”

Alice swallowed hard, willed back tears, and nodded.

She would work hard, prove herself, and, no matter the reason, Lady Burbidge would be glad she’d taken her on.



OLIVER, seated on a bench near the gardens, had been waiting for Alice for over an hour. It hadn’t been a hardship as he was enjoying the evening air, the fragrance of the roses, and the downtime. He’d had a few realizations, chief among them that it had been four days now without phone or computer, and that only now, when he’d finally stopped reaching for his devices, was his addiction to both apparent.

The moratorium was kind of nice.

It was getting dark, and when he finally saw Alice walking in his direction, he waited until she was almost upon him before standing up.

She stifled a scream, then recognized him and blew out a breath. “Oliver, my goodness, you scared me to death!”

Oliver chuckled, loving that she’d finally called him by his name. “I’m sorry, I was waiting for you.”

“Skulking about, more like.”

He chuckled again. "Am I forgiven?"

"Hmm," she started to walk again and he fell into step beside her.

"Where were you today?"

"I was given new responsibilities. I am to train as a lady's maid."

He could see she was proud of the new position, and it touched his heart.

She was just so darned cute.

Cynically, he wondered if Lady Burbidge was protecting Alice, keeping an eye on her, or simply thwarting Lord Burbidge.

Any which way, if it made Alice happy, and kept that middle-aged pervert away from her, it was fine by him.

They walked side-by-side, and he was very aware of her feminine presence. In fact, she brought out something in him, a strength and masculinity that made him feel quite protective and possessive. He'd never felt this way with anyone before. Not even Daphne.

"I'm just hopeful that I can impress Lady Burbidge."

"I've no doubt that you will. I've known quite a few lady's maids in my time," he said, thinking of his mother, who'd had one his entire life.

"And how did they impress?"

He considered the things his mother would value in an employee. "Loyalty above all. Do not ever talk about her to anyone. You have friends in the kitchen that you're used to sharing stories with," he raised his brows at her.

She pressed her lips together, looking slightly abashed. "No more gossip?"

He chuckled. "None."

She nodded, but looked worried, as if she didn't trust herself.

"Always go the extra mile. Keep things neat and tidy, and try to anticipate anything she might need: her reticule, hat, a sweater. It is your job to keep her comfortable."

Although, if Oliver had his way, she would have her own lady's maid soon enough if that was what she wanted.

And they could worry about impressing her.

He saw her glance around, and once again his protective instincts rushed to the fore. There wasn't much he wouldn't do to keep her safe.

Just a few more days and she was out of there. They both were.

"Thank you, Oliver. You are a good friend."

Oliver winced. He'd heard those words before. He was planning a life with her and she was friend-zoning him?

"What is it?" she asked.

He drew in a breath and let it out slowly.

He needed to do something that would make her see him as more

than a friend, as a man, as a potential life-partner, a husband.

He needed her to know that he was serious.

He pulled her to a stop and took both her hands in his. "Alice, I know we haven't known each other for long, but I do know what's in my heart, and I've never been a man to wait around for things to happen. I like to make them happen. What I'm trying to say is, will you marry me?"

Alice gazed up at him, shock apparent in her expression.

Maybe he was pushing things too hard and too fast, but as he had every intention of making her his wife, he couldn't regret the premature proposal.

He wanted her to see him.

"I ... I barely know you! No!" she said, and looking more flustered than he'd ever seen her, she wrenched her hands away, her brows furrowing. She looked angry.

"Are you angry?"

"Yes! You show up here, and you very quickly act like you are in love with me. You don't even know me."

Oliver's chin juttet. "I'm trying to get to know you."

She looked at a loss. "But, why?"

Oliver threw up a hand. "Because I like you. Very much."

"You like the way that I look, you mean."

Oliver smiled at that. Her tone was so prickly, and he couldn't deny her comment, so he simply said, "Well, for the most part, yes. Though, I'm trying very hard to overlook the wart on the tip of your nose, but other than that, yes, I think you're beautiful."

Her mouth dropped, and her hand flew to her nose. "I do not have a wart on my nose!"

Oliver's grin widened, he was an idiot for teasing her, but he couldn't seem to help himself. "Oh? My mistake. Then it's your prickly attitude that I'm struggling with."

She gave him a miffed look, and then turned and walked away.

He deserved it. He watched her go, wondering, had they just had a fight?

He wasn't sure, because he was still smiling.

He watched her walk the rest of the distance to her house, watched as she went inside and shut the door. Everything about her made him happy.

And, all right, apparently, he didn't have this romancing thing down, but he'd simply have to do better. He was known for his brain, but when she was around, he couldn't seem to think straight.

Still, he thought that had gone pretty well. She wouldn't see him as just a friend now, would she?

He turned and walked away, still grinning.



SHE COULD NOT BELIEVE Oliver had proposed.

And that she'd said no!

She hadn't even known the man a week, though her thoughts had been so filled with him, it seemed like forever since he'd arrived.

Still, what could he have been thinking?

Heart pounding, she stood there, inside her father's house, with her back pressed against the door.

A slow smile started to spread across her face.

A handsome, intelligent man, close to her own age, had honorable intentions toward her.

Had asked her to marry him.

She chuckled. What would he have done if she'd said yes?

She chuckled even more at the thought.

He would have been in for it then, wouldn't he? She pushed away from the door to start a late supper for her father.

Only then did she notice him, sitting at the kitchen table, and staring at her in disbelief.

He jumped up and looked out the window.

She saw his shoulders slowly relax and then he turned his worried gaze to her. "Did that young Mr. Graham frighten you?"

Frighten her? She could feel her heart pounding and realized she must look a sight. No wonder her father had been worried. She pressed her hands to her cheeks to hide the rising heat. "No, Papa, he didn't frighten me."

He continued to stare at her, curiosity in his gaze. "Well, then? Did he get fresh?"

She dropped her hands and grinned at her father. "I guess he did at that. He asked me to marry him."

Her father's eyes widened and he looked astounded. "What did you say?"

"I said no," she raised a fist and pressed it against her lips, stifling another chuckle.

Her father watched her for a long moment, then threw back his head and laughed.

She watched him, and on a surge of emotion, rushed forward and grabbed his arm. "Did you hear me? I said no!"

"Yes, daughter, I heard you well enough." He was still chuckling. "It does not hurt a young man if he does not get everything he wants, right when he wants it."

She hurried over to look out the window, but Oliver must have turned the corner and was out of sight.

She turned back to see her father sitting down once more.

“Your mother turned me down twice when I asked her to marry me. It took me two weeks to get up the courage to ask a second time, but the third time I asked the next day. I could see she was weakening.”

Alice’s mouth dropped in astonishment. “She told you no?”

He chuckled. “And me, an up-and-coming gardener with good prospects. Don’t you worry, that young man does not look to be easily put off. He’ll ask you again, and mayhap next time you’ll say yes?”

She shook her head. “I hardly know him.”

Her father shrugged. “As to that, you’ll have a lifetime to get to know him after the wedding. Don’t you worry, I like the looks of him just fine. Make him wait if you wish, accept him if you wish, but,” when he looked up, she could see the worry that clouded his expression. “Mayhap don’t make him wait too long.”

He winked at her and once again, looking lighthearted and happy, as if Oliver’s proposal had lifted a burden from his shoulders.

She supposed she was a burden.

And yes, she did need some time to get used to the idea of marriage. But she did like Oliver, very much, and thought they could do very well together.

She wished she could have a little longer to get to know him, but circumstances being what they were, perhaps accepting his proposal, if he did propose again, would be for the best.

A spark of happiness lit within her and she knew she was only fooling herself.

If Oliver proposed again, she might just leap at the chance to say yes.

## Chapter 12

The next morning, Oliver was not as enraptured by his surroundings.

He'd seen this day going differently.

He was hot, sweaty, and tired of acting as foreman as he oversaw ten men clear a fallow field and start planting turnip seeds and clover.

Dapple, sticking close as always, seemed to enjoy their jaunt. Chasing after butterflies and sniffing at plants.

At least one of them was having a good time.

As his horse moved restlessly beneath him, he shot Lord Burbidge, also astride, an irritated glance.

Oliver had made the mistake of asking about Alice, hoping to establish that she was now off limits.

Lord Burbidge had responded by insisting upon his presence to superintend phase one: the planting process.

So much for strategy.

Oliver had come up with the four-field system, but Lord Burbidge hadn't yet implemented it, feeling the old ways were fine.

It would do away with fallow fields going forward, the clover would replenish the soil, and the turnips would feed far more sheep and cattle through the winter months, ensuring better breeding.

In five years, he'd have at least triple his livestock, as well as another stream of income from the majority of the turnips.

At home, his days usually passed quickly, but today he could almost hear the slow ticking of each second going by, and it was incredibly irritating.

He hadn't seen Alice.

And if he couldn't see Alice, how was he supposed to court her?

He had a new plan, of course, and was counting down the hours until this evening.

He was there to rescue her.

He was there to slay dragons.

It was supposed to be more exciting.

Surely, he'd already disrupted the way events had unfolded? He didn't see why they couldn't just leave now.

Of course, he hadn't heard a peep out of Wickham, so leaving early with Alice wasn't looking very likely at the moment.

He was used to the hustle and bustle of London. He was used to being able to walk out of his penthouse suite, go down to production, or the gym, or take the elevator to the mall, stretch his legs and get a cup of coffee.

He missed the anonymity of the crowds.

He missed the chauffeur that would take him anywhere he wished to go.

He also chose who he spent his day with, and was finding that, back in his own time, Lord Burbidge wouldn't have even made the list.

As they sat atop horses, Lord Burbidge had alternated between discussing his neighbors and picking Oliver's brain for ideas on how to manage his estate for maximum profit, which Oliver had already explained, and written out in detail.

So, add a slow-witted employer into the mix, and the day was excruciating.

Any fantasies he'd ever had of buying himself a place in the country were well put to rest.

Apparently, he was a city boy.

And that was just fine by him.

Unless, of course, Alice had a preference.

He stifled a sigh. Maybe he wasn't as smart as he thought he was if someone of Lord Burbidge's limited intelligence could foil his plans.

Of course, it wasn't as if they were in a battle of wits.

It was much more basic.

Oliver was trying to see Alice, and Lord Burbidge was trying to stop him, and as Lord Burbidge was technically his employer at the moment, the other man kept winning.

But tonight, it would be another warm summer evening, and Lord Burbidge and his wife had been invited to go to the neighbors.

Even better, Oliver thought he might have rid himself of Mr. Reardon as well.

Reardon had the intelligence of a wild boar, perfectly suited to attack, and not good for much else.

Boars were dangerous when confronted, but if left to themselves, their own base desires would take precedence, and they could be lured out of the way.

Removed from play, as it were.

Earlier today Oliver had supplied a nice pile of truffles, or what have you.

They'd been out looking at property, and discussing crops with some of the farmers, and Oliver had seen the way that Reardon's eyes had lingered upon one of the local girls.

For some reason, the young lady seemed to return his interest.

There was no accounting for taste, and after a moment of utter disbelief, Oliver realized he'd just been handed a perfect opportunity.

When the others were distracted, he'd told the poor deluded maid that Reardon thought her beautiful.

After that, the girl had practically glowed in Mr. Reardon's presence.

When Reardon asked what he'd been talking to the girl about, he'd told him the girl had expressed an interest in Mr. Reardon, and Oliver had promised to pass on the information.

True love in the making.

He should feel bad about the manipulation, especially as he was guiding the poor deluded woman toward such a disgusting brute, but as it fell in so well with his own plans, he refused to feel too bad about it.

If they were making eyes at each other, the man would leave Alice alone.

When the cat was away the mice would play.

Now he just had to get through the rest of the day.

But tonight, he'd court Alice.

He'd talk her into running away with him.

He was a little sketchy on how he'd do that exactly, but hoped it would come to him.

When he put that big brain of his to work, it always did.



ALICE HELPED PUT the finishing touches on Lady Burbidge's hair, and shared a smile with Fiona.

"You look beautiful, my lady," Fiona said. She'd done an exceptional job, and Alice had paid close attention, and even helped.

Lady Burbidge looked at both of them and smiled. "Well done, girls." She stood, her gown rustling and her eyes gleaming with excitement.

Alice stifled a sense of yearning. She'd never be invited to a social event, but was happy to have been part of helping Lady Burbidge look so beautiful.

"You truly look stunning." The moment the words were out, she feared she'd overstepped her bounds, but the older lady smiled with appreciation. "Thank you, my dear."

"Are you ready, Mother?" Jonathan and Jeremy came in, boisterous as always, and looking well-turned out themselves in dark formal clothing.

"Mother, you look nice," one of them said.

“As do you,” she responded.

Alice agreed. They were young men on the cusp of manhood. They were sure to break a few hearts in the next few years.

Lady Burbidge walked over and straightened one twin’s jacket, tugging the frills at his wrist, and then smoothing out the other twin’s neck cloth. “A matching set,” she said, pride in her voice. “You boys are to be on your best behavior tonight.”

“Of course, Mother,” they both said in unison.

Lady Burbidge scoffed, and then led the way. One twin lifted his chin at her, and it was most likely Jonathan judging by the cheeky grin he sent her direction, before both boys followed after their mother.

Fiona gestured for Alice to follow and the two girls watched as the twins hurried down the stairs and Lady Burbidge, walking at a much more sedate pace, moved down the staircase to where her husband waited below, looking very sharp himself.

Lady Pamela stood beside him, smoothing her gown.

Lord Burbidge watched his wife descend, and then his gaze slid to Alice.

She ducked back immediately, a sick feeling settling in her stomach. If Lady Burbidge noted his gaze, her feelings could be hurt.

She could hear Lord Burbidge complement his wife, and then the entire family was leaving through the front door to the waiting carriage.

As she heard the door shut behind them, she followed Fiona back to Lady Burbidge’s room, where they quietly put things back in order.

“You are doing very well,” Fiona said.

“Thank you.”

Fiona sighed. “And you are very nice, as well.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I give you some advice?”

Something inside of Alice seemed to freeze over. “Of course.”

“Stay away from Lord Burbidge. Stay out of sight.”

Alice nodded, and finished helping with the cleanup.

They were supposed to go down to the kitchen and have dinner, and some time off tonight, and she’d been looking forward to it.

She’d been hoping Oliver would be there.

Now, all she felt like doing, was going home to have a good cry.

She didn’t want Lord Burbidge’s attention.

Until Oliver had come along, she’d never desired any man’s interest.

Why hadn’t she simply accepted Oliver’s proposal?

OLIVER WAS GOING to romance his future wife.

Once the Burbidge's left, he went to the kitchen to talk to Cook. "Is everything ready?"

Cook, looking excited about her role in all this, used both hands to gesture with a flourish toward the basket sitting on the end of the worktable. "Tis all 'ere."

Oliver peeked inside.

Meat, fruit, cheeses, biscuits, a bottle of wine and two mugs.

He smiled. "I can't thank you enough for this."

"Oh, go on with you. I am 'appy to do it. Alice is a nice girl, and tis past time she was married."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "This is leadin' to marriage, is it not? I'll not find out later that ye are married and 'ave a wife stashed in London?"

Oliver laughed, feeling a warm swell of emotion for the older woman. "No wife, not yet, but I'm hopeful that's going to change very soon."

Cook shook a spoon at him. "Just so we understand each other."

"Yes, ma'am."

Oliver took the basket and hurried outside. He went directly to his room behind the stables, and when he got there, he whisked the blanket off his bed, and then walked quickly to a grassy spot he'd picked out earlier.

It had bushes, trees, and privacy.

He spread the blanket, put the basket in the center, and then wrapped the edges together to protect the food from bugs.

He went to find Alice.

When he opened the door to the kitchen, he intended to ask if one of the maids would run up and find her, but she was already there, seated at the table and looking as pretty as a picture in her yellow dress and white apron. The blonde of her hair caught some of the sunlight coming in from one of the windows, and her blue eyes seemed to light, just the slightest bit, at his appearance.

His lips curved in an easy smile as everyone in the kitchen looked at him expectantly. He enjoyed the moment, the fact that everyone was in on the secret, and that they were happy for Alice. They were good people, good friends, and he was gratified that she had this, people who loved and cared about her, just as he had in his time.

He'd found that friendships made life easier, more entertaining, and worth living.

He finally said, "Alice, would you like to take a walk with me?"

Her eyes widened, and she glanced at the others. "I was just about to have supper," she said uncertainly, her hands fluttering on the tabletop before she settled them on her lap.

“This won’t take long. Please?”

She glanced at the other women in the room, and finally nodded. “All right.”

When she stood, Oliver held out his arm, and she blushed, but did take it.

They walked outside together, down the slope, past the stables and servants’ quarters, and through the field until they rounded the trees. Alice chuckled along the way, and her good humor made Oliver smile with anticipation.

“Where are we going?” she asked, for about the fifth time.

“I hope you’re hungry.”

“Well, I was!”

Oliver laughed.

Oh, to take this girl out to the fanciest restaurant in London. Surely, that, and more, was in their future.

As they approached the spot he’d picked, he hurried to the blanket, untied it, and spread it out. “Have a seat, and I will serve you an incredibly tasty meal.”

“Is it the same one I would have eaten in the kitchen?”

He laughed again, and indicated the blanket. “You’ll see, soon enough.”

It took her a moment, but she finally moved and carefully sank down.

Oliver sat on the other side of the basket and lifted the lid. For all the confidence he’d felt earlier in the day, now that he had Alice where he wanted her, he wasn’t sure what to say.

How did one go about romancing a girl?

He realized they didn’t have plates, and that Cook had settled the food on a platter, but as it was all finger foods, they could easily make due.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” he asked and picked up the bottle and one of the mugs.

“You set this whole thing up in advance?” Alice asked in a soft voice.

“I did.”

She pressed her hands to her face, bent forward, and burst into tears.

Oliver’s breath caught in his chest. He had no idea how to handle this. “Wait ... I’m sorry ... we can go back if you’d like, and eat with everyone else.”

She cried for a moment, and then she wiped her eyes, looked up at him, and smiled. “No one has ever done anything so nice for me.”

He felt a warm rush of tenderness. He didn’t really understand girls. How could he? It seemed they were all so different. He’d



certainly never seen Daphne do anything like that before.

But somehow, somehow, it looked like he'd gotten it right.

## Chapter 13

Alice felt foolish for bursting into tears, but she was happy all the same.

She took a few deep breaths and calmed herself, and Oliver waited, giving her time, no doubt wishing he was anywhere but there.

"Are you ready to eat?" he asked in a quiet voice, probably afraid the tears would start again.

She nodded, chuckled, and accepted a mug of wine. He took out a platter of food, and he was clumsy with it, which was somehow sweet, and after a moment she felt more herself.

Why did he have such an effect on her? "Thank you for doing this. It was very thoughtful."

"I'm glad you like it," he said, somewhat bashfully.

Listen to the two of them, talking to each other in such a stilted way. The man had asked her to marry him, for heaven's sake.

He chuckled. "I wish I were better with words."

A laugh was startled out of her. "I was just thinking the same of myself."

That drew a grin from him.

"I think you are very good with words," she said in a rush, and could feel herself blushing as she gave him the compliment.

His chin lifted, giving him a look of confidence, and her heart melted a little more.

"You are the first to say so," he said. "If we were other people, less shy, what do you suppose we would discuss?"

"I don't know, the weather? The crops? Our employers? Oh, wait," she said with an impish grin. "I'm not supposed to do that anymore."

He chuckled. "I've been thinking about it. Why do you suppose people do talk about their employers?"

Alice fed a bit of meat to Dapple, who was most appreciative. "Perhaps they have more interesting lives?"

"More money, you mean?"

She shrugged. "It does give them more choices."

"Choices I'll lay at your feet the moment I can," he said.

She blushed at that and didn't know where to look.

They both helped themselves to some of the chicken and after a moment, Alice said, "It's very good."

"I talked Cook into putting it together for us."

She was touched that Oliver would go out of his way to do this, and that she had friends that would help. Still, she couldn't help teasing him. As she reached for a square of cheese, she said, "I did not suppose you actually prepared any of it yourself."

He grinned. "I could have if I'd set my mind to it."

"As if Cook would let you anywhere near her kitchen."

Oliver chuckled. "You do have a point."

After a moment, Alice said, "Will you tell me more about yourself?"

Oliver leaned back, bracing himself with one arm. "What would you like to know?"

"Well, I already know you're from London, your mother still resides there, and you must have noteworthy friends, as Lord Burbidge hired you based on a recommendation."

"That's all you know about me, is it?"

"I am open to learning more."

Oliver chuckled. "Well, I've always been a bit of a nerd."

"There is that word again. You are someone who likes to work with figures?"

"Yes, I do like to work with figures. And I'm very good at it."

"You are not going to make an attempt at false modesty, then?"

He chuckled again, and she found herself smiling as well.

"Not likely. There are too many things I'm not good at, so I'm not going to downplay my brilliance in the one area I shine."

"Brilliance, you say?"

"Brilliance," he assured her, with a nod of his head.

She bit back another smile, liking his confidence. "All right, you are good with numbers, and you do not have a modest bone in your body. What else?"

He grinned at her. "Well, let's see. I've never considered myself to be great at anything athletic, until recently. A friend of mine has started teaching me how to hold my own in a fight, so while that's new to me, I do enjoy it,"

"You enjoy fighting?"

"What I enjoy is his being able to take care of myself if I do have to fight."

She shivered. For some reason she liked that very much, as well. His words, his confidence, made her feel safe and protected. She couldn't help but glance at his fine figure.

He wasn't bulging with muscles like Mr. Reardon, but he definitely had an athletic build, and he did radiate self-confidence.

She had no doubt he would be able to handle himself in a fight, and why that made her heart flutter in her chest, she didn't know.

Feeling flustered, she quickly changed the subject. "I hear London is large and impressive. I would like to see it someday."

"I shall make sure that you do," Oliver said, and he sounded so sure of the fact, that she smiled.

Why did she feel so good in this man's company? Perhaps it was the way that he looked at her, as if she was something special. He actually seemed interested in what she had to say, and was willing to answer her questions as if she was more to him than just her appearance.

Whatever it was, she was glad to be here with him.

"Have you worked for very many prominent men?"

"Actually, I started my own business, and employed quite a few people."

"Doing what?"

"As, always, working with numbers."

"And yet, you are here now. Does that mean that you lost your business?"

"Something like that."

She could sense he did not wish to discuss it further, and that was fine. He did not have to tell her his entire life story in one go.

When they'd finished eating, he packed the platter, the wine bottle, and the mugs inside the basket, but she could see the lid wouldn't shut, so she brushed his hand away. "Allow me. You can carry it."

She swore she could feel his gaze as she organized the basket and placed the lid on top.

Oliver reached out and lightly touched her hand. "I'm not ready for our time together to end, are you?"

She couldn't help the shy smile tugging at her lips. She snuck a quick look at him under her lashes, then shook her head.

"Let's walk out to the river."

They stood, started out, and Oliver took her hand in his, twining their fingers together. The heat from his hand engulfed hers, radiating as if the point at which their skin touched was lit with fire. She felt breathless, small, feminine, and his touch stirred something within her and she felt slightly overwhelmed.

When they reached the short path, he went first, still holding her hand, leading her along behind him.

The damp smell and bubbling noise announced the river, and before long they stepped from the trees and into a clearing on the bank.

Oliver helped Alice onto a stone, placing them at eye level, his

hands spanning her waist and lingering.

Though they'd walked quite slowly, she was breathless, and when she dared to meet his gaze for a charged moment, heat rose in her face.

He tightened his hands at her waist and moved a step closer, studying her as if gauging her reaction.

She stood very still.

When he took another step closer, she lifted a trembling hand and placed it lightly on his shoulder.

As if it was a signal, he leaned in and kissed her, sending a wild jolt of excitement through her as he brushed his lips over hers, kissing her repeatedly, as if the taste of her was something he couldn't get enough of.

When he moaned softly, pulling her even closer, sparks of heat ran through her, and for a moment she worried she'd burn up, expire from pleasure, but then she couldn't think at all.

He gave her one last, long kiss and when he pulled back, they looked at each other, she with bewilderment and he with unconcealed male satisfaction.

They both smiled.

He put his hands out to span her waist again with the intent of helping her down, the smile on his face so masculine and appreciative she felt her knee's go weak. "My lady."

She placed her hands on his shoulders and he swung her down, lifting her as if she weighed nothing, sending a thrill through her.

She was grateful for the help as she was sure she would have fallen flat on her face if she had tried to hop down on her own. When he offered her his arm, she took it without hesitation. She barely knew him, but already he was becoming very dear to her.

A euphoric feeling rose up within her. She'd questioned what it would be like to fall in love, and didn't have to wonder any longer.

It was happening, and it was lovely.



THE NEXT MORNING, Oliver was stuck in the dining room. He'd intended to eat with the servants, but Lord Burbidge had seen him, and invited him to eat with the family.

He listened to the Burbidge family talk about the dinner the night before.

Everyone was in a good mood.

Lady Burbidge was talking about a dress one of the other ladies wore, something that she intended to copy at the first opportunity.

This sort of talk was actually quite familiar to him. His own life

had been somewhat similar, his mother and father going to parties, dragging him along when he couldn't get out of it, discussing their friends and acquaintances the next morning.

"Constance Wilson has grown up a lot," one of the twins said, his tone admiring.

"Too bad she did not wish to dance with you," Lady Pamela smirked at her brother.

"That's enough of that now," Lady Burbidge said. "Did I tell you that Eleanor Edwards is coming out sometime today. She wants some cuttings from my rose garden. Isn't that sweet?"

Lord Burbidge, looking uninterested, mumbled a sound of agreement as he focused his attention upon Oliver. "I spoke to Sir Charles Munson about some of your ideas. He'll be at the dinner party tomorrow night, and he's hoping to hear more. I think he might even be hoping to invest with us."

Tomorrow night sometime, Oliver was hoping to be gone. But as he had no idea what time Wickham would show up, he simply nodded. "Jolly good."

"Indeed," Lord Burbidge said, jovial, and with money signs in his eyes.

Oliver couldn't fault the man as that would be like the pot calling the kettle black. He did like to bring about change, which had brought him many rewards.

In fact, he was glad for the man's enthusiasm, or he'd never have been hired.

"Mr. Graham," Lady Burbidge addressed him. "How was your outing with Alice yesterday?"

Oliver, about to take a bite of egg, froze, completely taken by surprise. He hadn't even been aware that Lady Burbidge knew about it. It seemed the aristocracy liked to gossip about their employees as much as everyone liked to talk about them.

"What outing?" Lord Burbidge asked.

Oliver glanced over at the maid, Ginny, standing by the sideboard, and was glad Alice wasn't there.

Oliver set his fork down. "It was fine. We had a good time."

"Our Alice and Mr. Graham keeping company. Is that not delightful? Do tell us more."

Why had Lady Burbidge had to say anything?

"There is not much to tell. I simply packed a basket of food," Oliver said, not wanting to get Cook in any trouble. "And we had supper in the field by the creek."

One of the twins laughed, seeming to find it hilarious.

His mother shot him a glare. "Manners, dear, else you can eat above stairs with a governess."

“As long as it is Alice, I shall not mind.”

The twins repressed chuckles as Lord Burbidge looked down at his food, and there was a sudden air of menace at the table, prickling along Oliver’s spine.

“I think it is charming,” Lady Burbidge continued to talk, an air of sharp enjoyment to her tone, as if she was goading her husband.

It seemed to be working as the other man’s silverware hovered above his food, and his face reddened.

A flare of anger had Oliver lowering his gaze to his plate. He didn’t want to provoke the other man with a challenging stare. He needed to get Alice out of there. They just had to get through today, and tomorrow, and he was very aware that tomorrow, July 6, was the day she’d disappeared.

He just had to keep her safe for three more days, and then they were gone.

## Chapter 14

Alice, busy cleaning Lady Burbidge's room, realized she was smiling.

She couldn't stop thinking about the outing she'd shared with Oliver the day before.

She couldn't stop thinking about him.

He was kind, patient, strong, attractive; everything a man should be.

And his kisses set her afire.

She lifted the sheet on the bed, snapping it up into the air, and then letting it settle, feeling good about her life for once.

She was having pleasant, what if, thoughts. What if they were falling in love? What if they did marry? What if they had a family? Oliver was smart, ambitious. She should simply have said yes when he'd proposed.

Fortunately, he didn't seem to be giving up on her.

His kisses. Just the thought of them had her knees weakening. Her reaction had astonished her. She'd had no idea that kissing could be so appealing, so thrilling, so exciting.

She heard someone come into the room, and turned to see Lord Burbidge, glaring at her, as he stopped to shut the door behind him, enclosing them in the room together.

Her heartbeat seemed to stutter, then gallop, swift and violent.

She dropped the sheet, her fingers suddenly nerveless, clumsy.

"Alice, I have an offer to make to you."

"My lord?" she said in a voice that was small, barely there.

"I want to set you up in a house in the village. Further away if you'd prefer. A nice house, made of bricks, with plants, flowers, anything you want. You can garden to your heart's content. I'll supply a servant, and clothing, jewelry."

His expression was so intense it was frightening.

Somewhere within her, a well of anger that had been growing, a sense of injustice, enabled her to respond. "No," she said quietly but firmly. "We are not married, and it is wrong."

He took a few steps toward her, his expression tight and violent.



“Do not worry about condemnation. I am your Lord, and the sin will not be yours, but mine.”

She shook her head. “Lady Burbidge is my mistress, and I will not wrong her in such a way.”

“Is it because of your mistress? Or because of Oliver? You are not to go off with him like you did yesterday. You are mine. You belong to me, and I’ve been patient enough.”

Whatever he saw in her face, probably revulsion, ramped up his anger and his cheeks reddened, his fists clenched and he said on a growl, “Alice, we will be together!”

He seemed unstable, and at the same time so sure of himself that she almost believed him, like the fact of it was inescapable, and she didn’t have a choice.

She shook her head and whatever he saw in her face, made him even angrier.

“Are you too stupid to see what I’m offering? You are lucky to have caught my interest.”

When she said nothing, he continued, “You have your father to think about. And Oliver. I warn you girl, you won’t like what I’m capable of if I don’t get my way.”

Tears filled her eyes as despair welled within her. She would do anything to protect her father, and she couldn’t drag Oliver into this. She couldn’t risk either of them getting hurt.

But she was also fighting for her own life. “No! You must stop! You are married, you have a family, and I want what you have. I’m a decent girl, and I want marriage.”

His teeth clenched and he looked like he wanted to kill her. “You are my servant, and you belong to me. If you want children, I will be the one to sire them. They will tie us together.”

He looked at the bed, then at her, and she took two quick steps backward.

Surely, he would not.

He lunged forward and grabbed her around the waist, pulled her close and tried to kiss her.

She strained her head back and pushed against his chest, trying to fight him off.

He laughed and said, “It’s all right, I like a feisty woman. Once I’ve had you, you’ll settle down.”

She continued to struggle, and he grabbed hold of one arm and started to drag her toward the interconnecting door to his room.

She could scream, but if Lady Burbidge caught her, she would be blamed. “Oh, please, stop! Do not!”

Fiona opened the door, came into the room, and gasped.

Lord Burbidge released Alice.

She grabbed hold of the chest of drawers to steady herself, relief flooding through her.

Lord Burbidge took a long moment to consider, and then finally said, "I want you to think about it, and to accept your situation. It is, after all, inevitable."

With one last look at her, he walked into his own room.

With a sob, Alice started toward the other door and escape.

Fiona arched a brow, but before she could question her, Alice ran past as if the hounds of hell followed.

If felt as if they did.



ALICE RAN TO THE KITCHEN, ignoring startled exclamations, and then she was out the back door.

She ran straight to the rose garden and hid among the roses.

She sank down onto her knees, surrounded by beauty, and let herself cry.

She was probably going to get in trouble with Lady Burbidge for leaving her post.

She thought back to how happy she'd been earlier. Happy for her new position, happy to do her job.

What was she going to do?

Lord Burbidge had never been so aggressive, so angry.

She couldn't risk her father.

She wouldn't risk Oliver.

If she was cast out, Lord Burbidge would find her and do what he wished to do, anyway.

Should she talk to Father Tunstall?

If she spoke to him, he would, no doubt, talk to Lord Burbidge, but would he take her side?

Or, would he condemn her for a temptress?

Her tears finally stopped as a sense of finality settled upon her.

She saw a small weed, and reached forward and plucked it, and then pulled another.

There weren't many, and she suddenly wished the garden was full of them so she could yank and pull and take out her anger upon them.

Would that she could remove Lord Burbidge so easily and thoroughly from her life.

Eventually, she walked through the garden and to her medicinal plot in the back.

There were more weeds there, and it was satisfying to yank, pull, remove.

She did not want Lord Burbidge or the life he offered.

He was right in that many a servant might jump at the chance to be his mistress, to have an easier life.

But she wasn't interested, and never had been.

Would he really cast her father out? If he did, where would they go? Her father was getting older, and they had no family, just the two of them.

She thought of her mother's family, aristocrats to the bone. They'd kicked their daughter out on the streets when she'd become pregnant with Alice, and had never softened their stance. If her mother hadn't met George Munro, she'd have starved, or worse.

Just like they would starve now, if he could not find more work.

And at his age?

Tears filled her eyes again.

And what of Oliver? If he caused a fuss, Lord Burbidge would no doubt send Mr. Reardon after him.

Mr. Reardon could not be defeated by Oliver.

He was too big, too strong, and in trying to defend her Oliver might be hurt, might even be killed.

She would never do anything that would cause him harm.

Despair welled within her once more.

She had nothing, and no one, and nowhere to go.

## Chapter 15

Did Lord Burbidge kill Alice?

That was the question kicking around in Oliver's mind while he was alone and working in the study. The task was easy. He was writing detailed plans and placing them in the order they were to be tackled as he tried to come up with a plan.

He knew Alice liked him. But did she trust him enough to leave with him?

He wasn't sure they'd had enough time together for that.

It kept coming back to the murder. Had his presence diffused the situation? He could only hope so. His list of suspects was small; in his mind, it could only be Lord Burbidge, or his lackey Mr. Reardon.

Lord Burbidge disgusted him. His own wife held him in contempt, and rightly so.

One thing that had been drilled into Oliver by his father — never mess with the servants.

Not that it had been a problem, but it was understood that one did not do such things within his mother's household.

And while there had been a few young, pretty girls in residence over the years, Oliver had minded his manners as instructed.

Lord Burbidge was beneath contempt. He was also setting a poor example for his sons, teaching them that honor, integrity, and the sanctity of marriage were meaningless.

His sons would follow his lead as surely as Oliver had followed his own father's example.

And Mr. Reardon was an out and out dog. He seemed to have Lord Burbidge's interests at heart, though he didn't believe that a man of Reardon's ilk truly cared about anyone but himself.

Oliver could see him murdering someone with little remorse.

A symbiotic relationship, then.

Two dysfunctional bullies, having found each other, and bringing out the worst tendencies in the other.

He'd seen it happen before, usually in the news when crimes against humanity were being reported on. Gangs, serial killers, CEOs of companies.

Conversely, the murderer could be a random person who Oliver hadn't spotted, or hadn't even seen yet.

All he knew for sure was that Alice was going to be murdered, and he had to get her out of there before that happened.

Wickham was supposed to come tomorrow, but he wished they could simply leave now. Was there a way to contact Wickham in the here and now? Force the issue? Harry had mentioned that he lived somewhere outside Inverness.

Theoretically, they could walk to Wickham's place, but traveling without a guard would be foolhardy.

He could possibly get a message to Sir Kirby Wilmot, but he didn't have another gold ring or two lying about to exchange for safe passage.

He sighed.

He was just going to have to trust that Harry would make sure Wickham was where and when he said he would be.

Lord Burbidge came into the room. "Let's go for a ride and take a look at the property we're to develop."

Oliver was glad for the distraction. Anything to make this day go faster.



ALICE WAS USING a tiny brush to clean Lady Burbidge's jewelry, when one of the maids came into the room.

"Alice!" The word was whispered and intense.

Alice's eyes widened. Ginny was not allowed above stairs, so something must have happened.

"What is it?"

"Tis your father. He's been hurt."

Alice rose and started for the door, her heart clenching.

"The jewelry!" Ginny said, her eyes wide.

Alice hurried back and, with shaking fingers, carefully put the jewelry in its case and locked it once more. "Thank you."

She crossed to where Ginny stood in the doorway, and the two of them hurried down the stairs.

"What happened?"

Ginny just shook her head as they hurried through the hallway into the kitchen and when they went inside it was to find her father seated at the table, slumped over, and holding his wrist.

He moaned softly when Cook carefully placed a cloth over a cut on his face.

The horror of seeing her father injured in such a way froze her for a moment, until she gasped in a breath, and hurried forward.

“Father, what happened?” A dozen scenarios ran through her mind. He’d been kicked by a horse, or by the mule in the field that attacked anyone who came near. He’d fallen from the barn, or been set upon by ruffians.

But she knew. She knew what had happened.

No one in the room spoke, and Alice glanced at the stricken faces of Cook, Ginny, and Ida in turn.

She reached for her father’s hand, and tried to grasp it, but when he let out a gasp and drew back, she saw one of his fingers was bent and broken.

She gasped. “What happened?” she asked again.

Tears filled her father’s eyes, and he gave a quick shake of his head.

Alice stood so fast her chair scraped the stone floor and she pressed her hands to the table to steady herself, immediately understanding what had happened. “You confronted Mr. Reardon?”

Her father let out a breath, opened his mouth a few times as he seemed to try to find the words, and then finally just nodded again, and started to cry. Silent tears dripped down his face, and mingling with the blood still trickling from the wound on his cheek.

His face was starting to swell, already bruising, and she noted that his lip was cut as well.

Ferocious anger welled up within her, and without thought she turned on a rising tide of rage and walked toward the back door.

A chorus of protests rose, and Fiona rushed forward and grasped her arm. “No, no, you must not. He will hurt you, too.”

Coldness settled in her gut, pushing away any fear she should have felt.

“Let go,” she said, and yanked her arm free. She looked back at her father, whose face was filled with fear. “He’s not going to hurt me or he’ll get in trouble, won’t he?”

No one had anything to say to that, because it was true.

She was probably the safest person in this room.

Lord Burbidge would be very unhappy if Alice came to any harm. For that matter, Lady Burbidge might have something to say about it as well.

Reardon could claim her father had attacked him first, and no one, including Lord Burbidge would gainsay him.

But if Alice, a young girl, was attacked by a hulking brute, Reardon would have to face consequences.

She opened the door, shut it behind her, and went in search of the devil.

## Chapter 16

Old anger carried Alice across the lawn and she headed for the stables.

She looked for Reardon there, but when she didn't find him, she rounded the stables and headed toward the gardens, and when she didn't find him there, her anger simply built.

She headed back to the manor house and rounded the side.

She found Mr. Reardon talking, no, *laughing* with Lord Burbidge's steward, and she walked right up to the two of them.

"Excuse me, but I need to talk to Mr. Reardon."

The steward, Mr. Esterford, was a tall, thin man, with straw-like hair and a tan face. He gave a short, ugly laugh, and then gave Reardon a knowing leer. "Of course. You two have a good time," he said, and wandered off.

"How dare you?" Alice said, the words pouring out of her before she'd even realized she meant to say them. "How dare you harm my father. Lord and Lady Burbidge will both hear of this! You are a cruel, brute of a man, and you cannot get away with this."

Reardon threw back his head and laughed, an ugly, sharp sound.

Her rage jumped a notch, and she wanted to smack him in the chest with her fists, but knew if she did, he'd retaliate. "How dare you laugh after harming my father who is a kind and gentle man and has never done anything to you! How dare you hurt him!"

Reardon's laughter trailed off and he looked at her, his light brown gaze lit with humor. It reminded her of the way a lazy cat might look at a mouse, and a trickle of fear rose within her.

He suddenly struck, grabbing both her wrists and pulling her close to him. "And who do you think you are, little kitten, to tell me what to do? You, walking around here all 'igh and mighty, with his lordship and every other man sniffin' at your skirts. If it weren't for Lord Burbidge, you and I would 'ave this out right now."

She struggled against him. "Let me go!"

"Know this. When Lord Burbidge does finally tire of you, you and I are going to 'ave some fun times together, do you 'ear? And you'll no' be acting so fine when I'm through with you."

She kicked at him, her soft shoes doing him no harm, but hurting her toes.

In a contemptuous gesture, he released her with a shove, and she stumbled back a few steps.

Their gazes met, and his slid down her figure and then back up again, and he smiled. "Do not push me, little cat, or you'll no' like 'ow I respond."

She tried to hold back the tears pushing at her eyes, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. "Why? Why would you hurt my father? He is a kind, gentle man who never did anyone any harm."

"Why?" He let out a derisive laugh. "He tried to warn me off, 'e did. Told me to stay away from you, and told me 'e did no' like the way I spoke to you. No one talks to me like that and gets away with it."

He raked her with his gaze again. "No woman either, for that matter. I may not be able to give you your comeuppance at the moment, but I will do something about it, soon enough."

Fear and loathing rose up within her as their eyes met once again, and with a half sob, she turned and ran.

She was swamped by a feeling of utter hopelessness. When she glanced back it was to see that Reardon hadn't followed her, and she slowed her steps and made her way back to the kitchen.

What was she going to do? Surely, God did not put her on this earth to suffer this way. To have her loved ones suffer?

She thought of Oliver, but if she tried to turn to him, he'd simply get hurt as well.

What was she going to do?



OLIVER RODE with Lord Burbidge around the property and wasted the morning away.

The man was an ass.

He was always trying to one up Oliver, and he'd given him a feisty mount to ride, without even asking Oliver if he could ride.

In actual fact, Oliver had had riding lessons since the age of three, and quickly brought his mount under control.

He also found the man imitating his way of speech.

Oliver had been educated at independent schools since the age of three. He'd attended a preparatory boarding school, been privately tutored, attended Eton, and Oxford.

He'd lived a privileged life, but so had Lord Burbidge, so the attempts at imitation felt intrusive.



He'd also spoken to Oliver in French with an atrocious accent, and when Oliver had answered in the same language, as fluent as a Frenchman thanks to the French nanny who'd raised him until age eight, Lord Burbidge's face had actually tightened in anger.

The man wanted to know about his family, and Oliver had been perfectly honest, describing his situation with his mother, his father's passing, and the fact that he was not aristocracy.

Finally, Lord Burbidge had found something to gloat about.

The man was truly a bore.

Once Lord Burbidge had felt superior, the other man had finally relaxed, and they'd been able to discuss improvements to the property.

There were many to be made.

Oliver had to explain three times why improving the situations of the villagers in his care would be profitable to him in the long term.

They had discussed potential mining ventures, as Lord Burbidge's estates held obvious signs of coal. And, Oliver knew from his history, that this particular Shire was rich in mineral rights.

If Lord Burbidge would listen to him, he would double, or even triple his wealth in the next five years.

That last, had finally gotten through to the man.

When they'd finally ridden back to the manor house, and tossed the reins to a stable boy, Oliver was more than ready to be shed of the other man's company.

He was eager to go to the kitchens to see if Alice was there.

With her new position above stairs, he didn't get to see her nearly as often as he liked.

When Oliver arrived in the kitchen, his heart sank when he realized she wasn't there, and there was a general air of low spirits to the place. "What's happened?" he asked.

Cook, Fiona, Ginny, and Mrs. Quinn all glanced around at each other, some of them lowering their gazes, and Mrs. Quinn finally said, "Mr. Munro, the gardener, has had a mishap."

Alice's father? "Is he all right?"

Again, gazes darted around the room and finally Cook said, "A few scrapes and bruises, and a broken finger. But Alice is good with medicinals, and such, and she has braced his finger and applied some poultices to his injuries. He's resting at home now."

"Good, good. But what happened?" Oliver knew the dangers on a farm could be many, and even a gardener, one as skilled and experienced as Mr. Munro, could have mishaps.

No one responded, which made the whole episode seem suspect. "I will thank you for an answer, please," Oliver said in an authoritative tone, as if he deserved and expected an answer.

The three ladies looked at Mrs. Quinn, who looked slightly sick. Finally, she straightened her spine and clasped her hands together. "Mr. Reardon has injured him," her tone was quiet, as if she feared being overheard.

Rage such as he had never felt flooded him. He understood the situation in less than a moment.

The servants here did not have much recourse.

If they left the property in search of other work, they left for an uncertain future.

In the eighteenth century it wasn't as bad as it had been before the plague, and people didn't necessarily stay in one location their entire lives, and they certainly had more opportunities. But to just pack a bag and leave without knowing where your next meal was to come from? That left for a lot of uncertainty.

Bullies like Reardon could get away with much, as long as their masters allowed it.

In this case, Lord Burbidge, who had the character of a vulture, wasn't setting any sort of example.

Without another word, Oliver turned, opened the back door and exited. As he walked toward the servants' quarters, he heard the ladies' voices call out for him to wait, to come back, and then finally Cook called out, "Be careful!"

As Oliver walked, he reviewed Harry's training in his mind, and felt the sturdy weight of the knife he kept at his back.

Anger burned in his gut and his fists clenched open and shut as if in preparation for what was to come.

He heard the man before he saw him. Heard his obnoxious laughter and changed direction to go to the left of the stables instead of the right.

When he rounded the corner he saw Reardon, leaning against the stable wall, chewing on a piece of grass, chatting and laughing with the head stable master.

Oliver's fists automatically clenched, thumbs tucked and he didn't stop.

He must have been channeling Harry, because he did a very un-Oliver like thing and hauled his fist back and hit the man in the side of his face.

A sucker punch? Ha! How did he like them apples?

He drilled Reardon in the gut, trying to drill through to his spine the way Harry had taught him. No hesitation, no mercy, feet planted he drilled the man on the other side of his head once more.

The results were spectacularly anticlimactic.

He stepped back, using his left arm for defense, his right hand coming back again, and he found that rather than the fistfight/knife-

fight he planned to participate in, the other man slid to the side, his jacket catching along the stable wall making a scraping noise, like sandpaper, as he sank down into a dead faint.

A knockout.

Oliver took a few steps back, fists still at the ready, wondering if it was a trick.

He waited for the man to swipe his leg out from under him, and try and knock him to the ground, but no, it seemed the man really had passed out.

Oliver let out a harsh breath, and then another.

Harry would be so proud.

A noise had him looking up to see the stable master, wide-eyed, his mouth hanging open.

Oliver's heart was thundering, and elation grew within him.

He would have liked a video of this!

He looked at the man on the ground once more, wondering if perhaps he could have killed him, knowing that it did happen sometimes. Reardon could have had a brain aneurysm, or if he'd hit him just right, his brain could be bleeding.

With a surprise lack of regret, all those thoughts went through his mind, but as he watched the man on the ground, his chest rose and fell, and he knew he hadn't been so lucky.

Or unlucky, depending on how he looked at it.

He certainly didn't want to swing from the end of a rope.

The stable master was sputtering now, and Harry took a few more steps backward, raised a hand shaking from adrenaline, and gave the man a salute.

He turned and headed toward the Munro cottage.

He knew this wasn't over, that Reardon would want his revenge, and Oliver was more than willing to give him more where that came from.

He doubted that the next time he'd walk away with so few injuries.

But something solid and stubborn hardened within him, and though he would have to deal with the other man, he wasn't going to fear him.

Maybe next time he wouldn't walk away with so few injuries, but he had this time, and if Harry had taught him nothing else, it was to live in the moment.

As he walked toward the Munro cottage, he didn't try and repress the elation welling up within him.

Instead, he smiled.

THERE WAS a light knock on the door, and Alice froze in fear.

She was sitting by her father, and though it was a bright day outside, she'd covered the windows and lit a candle.

She was reading to him from one of the two books they owned, *Don Quixote*, because she felt she needed strength, and it reminded her of Oliver.

She glanced at her father who'd fallen asleep as she'd read, with some help from the medicinals she'd given him.

Her heart pounded so hard, she placed a hand on her chest as if to quiet it. Had Reardon come back to harm her or her father once more?

Hands shaking, she set the book on the table beside her and slowly rose, walking toward the door.

She hesitated for a long moment. "Who is it?" she finally asked.

She drew in a breath as she waited for a response, and then heard a low voice say, "Oliver."

She let out the breath in a rush, and realized she'd placed her hands on the door as if ready to hold it in place, to block an intrusion.

Relief left her almost boneless, and her hands shook as she lifted the latch.

"Oliver," she said.

"I heard about what happened to your father. I am so sorry."

"Thank you."

"I confronted Reardon." He took a deep breath, his chest lifted, and she realized there was an air of excitement about him.

She couldn't believe she'd heard him correctly "What?"

"I confronted Reardon."

She looked at him in frozen silence, then said, "What did he say?"

Oliver smiled, looking sort of sheepish at the same time. He raised a hand and rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, as to that," he glanced up and smiled once more, "we didn't actually have much of a conversation. I hit him and he went down like a log."

Fear rose within her. "You hit him? And ... he's unconscious?" She was having a hard time breathing.

He nodded.

She sucked in several breaths until she could finally say, "I spoke to him today as well."

"What?" Oliver looked horrified.

"We make a fine pair, do we not? What will he do when he wakes up?"

"Alice, I ..." Oliver lifted his chin. "I suppose he'll try to have a go at me."

She raised her hand to touch him, and then drew back. "Oh, Oliver, he's such a violent man. He could," she swallowed, hard. "He could hurt you."

She glanced toward her father's bedroom door, and could see him lying within, still asleep. "What if he tries to harm my father again?"

"He's welcome to try," Oliver said with such confidence that she blinked.

Everyone was afraid of Reardon. He was a cruel and frightening bully. You just didn't cross the man or else he'd make sure you regretted it.

She finally realized they were standing in the doorway, and she almost invited him in, but changed her mind and stepped outside.

He followed, and she carefully shut the door behind her. She looked up at him again. The bright afternoon sunlight was shining on his face, and he just seemed to glow.

"Thank you, Oliver," she said. "I don't know what's going to happen, but thank you for standing up for my father."

"What are you most concerned about?" he asked.

She didn't think she'd ever been asked that question in her life. She glanced around, and didn't see anybody, so she started walking toward the rose garden, which would afford them a modicum of privacy.

She hadn't confided in him about Lord Burbidge, and worried he would think less of her for drawing such attention, and she couldn't find the words to speak.

Her father had been the one man in her life that she could trust, but she felt a welling of emotion for this man beside her, as he waited patiently for her to gather her thoughts.

Once in the garden, the sweet smells of the different kinds of roses perfumed the air and she finally glanced at him. "Do you know why Mr. Reardon hurt my father?"

"Tell me."

Heat rose in her face as shame filled her.

"I do not know the particulars, but does it have anything to do with the fact that Lord Burbidge is showering you with unwanted attention?"

The shame that she felt before was nothing to what she felt now. Her heart felt pierced with it now with the words spoken aloud between them.

"I ... I swear to you that I have not encouraged Lord Burbidge in any way."

"Alice, I have eyes in my head. I've observed the situation for myself. You hold no blame in this matter, and should feel nothing but disgust and anger for this situation that you have not brought upon yourself."

The relief at hearing him say those words aloud brought tears to her eyes and the stress of the day, her father's injuries, her

confrontation with Mr. Reardon, Oliver's fight — she pressed her hands to her face and started to sob.

Oh, she was such a fool. She couldn't do anything right around this man, and she turned away from him to hide her face, feeling yet more shame at her behavior.

What must he think of her?

"Alice," his voice was gentle, and he took her by one shoulder and urged her to turn toward him.

She let herself be turned, and when his arms gently enclosed her, even with her hands still pressed to her face, she tried to contain her emotions, but the sympathy and understanding coming from Oliver, of all people, let loose a flood gate and she couldn't seem to stop.

He led her down the row of roses, sat down on the bench, and drew her down upon his lap.

She continued to cry as she wrapped her arms around him and pressed her face into his neck while he held her close and rubbed her back.

The storm lasted another few minutes, until she finally controlled herself.

Oliver offered her a handkerchief, and she mopped her face as her sobs slowed and the tears finally stopped.

She lay against him, boneless with the pleasure of being in his arms, took a deep breath and said, "I'm sorry."

"No need. It's not every day that I get the chance to have my arms wrapped around a beautiful woman. If my shirt is to be soaked at the same time, well, it's a small price to pay in my opinion."

She finally looked up at him. "You truly struck Mr. Reardon?"

"I did, and he toppled like a tree."

"You know he won't let it stand."

"And you know that I'm not a helpless old man who cannot defend himself."

She was starting to realize that.

Starting to have a sliver of hope.

The way he was gazing at her, she couldn't help but glance at his lips, and when she raised her face, just the slightest bit, he kissed her.



OLIVER COULD NOT GET ENOUGH of her. The softness of her lips, the way she clung to him, the way she seemed to really enjoy his kiss.

This was definitely the girl for him.

She was his, and no matter the century, he was keeping her.

It was difficult to tear himself away, but he finally did.

He pressed a kiss to her neck, and they held each other, both of

them breathing a little heavily, and he felt like he was on top of the world.

He chuckled.

She leaned back, "What?"

"I had better walk you back home."

"All right."

As he escorted her to her front door, she clung to his arm, and he had to admit he liked how he was feeling. "I'm going to talk to Lord Burbidge about you."

She tensed. "No, please do not. Lord Burbidge will turn you out and then I will not get to see you."

He liked her worry. "All right. Who else could we talk to about the situation?"

He doubted that finding a constable would help. Not in this place and time.

Going to the man's wife probably wouldn't help either.

In this day and age, even Lord Burbidge's wife was completely dependent upon him, and could be beaten without repercussions. The man could even banish her to another house, somewhere she might not like. She had too many reasons to look the other way.

"Who else could we talk to about the situation? Who might influence Lord Burbidge?" He considered the man's business associates, those he hoped to do business with in the near future.

"I had thought to go to the priest, but was afraid," Alice said quietly.

A priest, of course. In this time, the church had a lot of power. They might even hold some power over Lord Burbidge and could perhaps influence the man toward better behavior.

"What is his name?"

"Father Tunstall."

"Ah." Oliver recognized the name of the priest who'd recorded the fact that Alice had run away when she'd disappeared. "It's a good idea. Surely Lord Burbidge would listen to a spiritual advisor?"

Alice was looking down as they walked across the grass. Finally, she gave a slight shrug. "I don't know. And I truly do not know if the priest would listen to a woman."

"I will go with you, of course."

"And what would a man of God think of that? My bringing a young man with me to stand against his lordship?"

"He might think," Oliver said softly, "that the young man was interested in a relationship with you."

She gave his arm a slight squeeze, all the encouragement he needed apparently, because he smiled down at her and squeezed her arm in return.

She glanced away again, and he wished he could tell her everything.

Tell her that she was not going to be subject to Lord Burbidge and his wishes for the rest of her life.

Tell her that he had a plan to get her out of there.

Warn her that she'd been murdered and the situation here was serious, not something to sweep under the carpet because it could end in her death.

He really, really wanted to tell her all of that.

She clung to him, her blonde hair shining in the sunlight, and he felt as if his heart cracked open and filled with her. She was the only one to ever touch that place, and he felt almost vulnerable in her presence.

He tried to dampen his emotions by analyzing his feelings.

He was protective, certainly, possessive, and tender toward her. Emotions he'd felt from the first time he'd seen her.

Almost as if, even then, he'd known they were meant to be together.

Yes, she was pretty, but beyond that there was much to like. He loved the gentle way she had about her, how protective she was of those she loved, her underlying stubbornness.

He wanted to propose once again, wanted her to say yes, but she was also in a vulnerable state at the moment, and he found he couldn't bring himself to take advantage.

He remembered what Daphne had said to him. Not to get lost in white knight syndrome. Not to mistake love for feeling good about himself because he was rescuing her.

She'd cautioned him to get to know her first.

At the time, the advice had rankled, but now he looked at it from the opposite view point.

Alice had the right to get to know him. To fall for him. Without the stress that was in her life right now.

He didn't want her to choose him because he was on her side, helping her.

He wanted her to truly fall in love with him.

At the moment, the danger toward her had not lessened one wit.

Besides, he was a poor excuse for a white knight without so much as a horse to his name, or a pound in his pocket. At the moment, he was as dependent upon Lord Burbidge's good will as she was.

Now wasn't the time. They could sort their feelings when they made it back to his century. When she was safe and had time, and hopefully the inclination to think of other things, such as romance.

They stopped at her front door. "I do believe talking to the priest is a good move, and the sooner the better. It could be the answer to



reining in Lord Burbidge and his Pitbull.”

“Pitbull?”

“It’s an expression that refers to a savage animal that will attack for its master.”

“All right,” she finally said.

“All right?”

He smiled, proud of her.

If they could get the support of the priest, and shame Lord Burbidge, perhaps that’s all that it would take to save Alice.

## Chapter 17

Oliver tapped on Alice's door the next morning.

He'd half expected to run into Reardon on the way over, but it hadn't happened.

When Alice opened the door, she was smiling, and her eyes were shining, and Oliver felt ten feet tall. "Good morning," he said, grinning back at her.

"Good morrow."

"How is your father?"

She stepped back and held the door open. "Come inside and see for yourself."

Oliver ducked inside and glanced around their home.

It was humble, but homey. A small kitchen table. A bookshelf on one wall that held two books. A beautiful vase on a doily. A bed, and some stairs that led to a loft, where he suspected that Alice slept at night.

It was very neat and tidy.

He glanced at Mr. Munro, who was seated at the kitchen table eating a bowl of porridge.

"Hello, laddie, come in. Have ye broken your fast?"

Oliver shook his head.

"Have a seat, have a seat."

Oliver sat on the third chair. When he did, Alice was quick to fill a bowl and place it in front of him, along with a slice of brown bread. She filled his cup with milk, and then joined them at the table.

It was quite different from the spread the Burbidge's put on every morning, but he would eat simple fare, any day of the week, in order to sit next to Alice.

She looked bright, and cheery, and he could not help smiling once again.

Mr. Munro cleared his throat, and when Oliver glanced up, it was to see the older man looking amused.

"How are you feeling today?" Oliver asked.

Mr. Munro shook his head. "The finger will take a while to heal up, but I will be fine." He lifted his hand to show that his pinky finger

had been stiffened along a piece of wood and wrapped with material.

From the way the injury had been described, if they were in the twenty-first century, Mr. Munro would probably have had surgery. Oliver felt a real sense of helplessness over the fact that he couldn't simply take the man to a doctor and pay for the best medical care.

"I'm glad to hear that, sir," was all he said.

The older man continued, "Alice told me what happened with you and Mr. Reardon yesterday."

Oliver nodded and took a bite of cereal.

"Have you seen him since?"

Oliver shook his head.

"You must be on your guard. Reardon will be looking for some payback."

Oliver swallowed, and said, "I expect you're right."

Mr. Munro looked at Oliver as if taking his measure and then said, "Good man, good man."

No doubt, Oliver should feel he had a dark cloud hanging over him, but regardless, could not help his good mood.

They quickly finished breakfast, and after Mr. Munro assured them he didn't need anyone to sit with him, and that he would latch the door behind them, they were on their way.

Oliver was glad to have Alice to himself once more.

The morning was still a bit chilly, but Oliver had his jacket, and Alice her cloak, and it seemed that just having her at his side made for a perfect day.

As if she followed his line of thought, she said, "Tis a beautiful morning."

He glanced around at the dew-covered grass, the upcoming picturesque bridge they had to cross to get into the village, the trees, and the sky already bright with sunlight, promising a warm day. "It is."

They walked side-by-side, and Oliver considered reaching out to take her hand, but she was shooting him shy glances, and he decided against it.

That would come more naturally in time.

"What was your life like before you came here?" she asked.

"I lived on my own in London."

She glanced up at him, surprise in her expression. "You have a house in London?"

Oliver shook his head. "Not anymore."

"You are not a gambler, are you?"

Oliver laughed. "Not in the least. Why would you ask that?"

"Well, if you lost your house ..."

Oliver wished he could tell her that his portfolio was doing very

well, thank you very much, and that he had a home that was practically a showplace thanks to an expensive architect and interior designer. But, of course, he couldn't say that.

If he did have his home in London, and a pocket full of money, he'd be hiring a carriage to take them there posthaste.

Instead, he shrugged and said, "I could not afford the place at this time," which was true enough at the moment.

After a moment she asked, "Why did you come here?"

For Oliver, who had never seen any point in lying, and either told the truth or kept his mouth shut, this was absolutely agonizing.

He decided to stick with the facts as they were for now. Or as close to them as he could get. "I used to work for a large company, but it's gone now, so I was looking for employment elsewhere when Lord Burbidge was recommended to me."

"Lord Burbidge does seem taken with you."

"The man likes to make money, and he likes my ideas for doing so."

She didn't say anything to that, and they walked in silence for a while. Her presence at his side felt right. Her kind, gentle demeanor, her soft-spoken voice, the way her blonde hair fluttered in the breeze; he could no longer imagine a world without her in it.

They walked through the village, and Oliver glanced around at the thatched roof homes, the horses, chickens, and goats. There were children running around, and a few men and women raised their hands and shouted out greetings, gazes bright with curiosity.

Alice knew everyone, and when they finally made their way to the chapel, Oliver could feel the gazes of the villagers watching them as they went inside.

He immediately spotted the priest, a short man, wearing a black gown with a white neck cloth at his throat. His thick salt and pepper hair put him at mid-fifties or so.

He was straightening a silk cloth across the altar, and several boys were lighting sconces and candles and another swept the floor.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared. As Oliver was used to people gawking, he found it amusing.

Alice on the other hand, grasped his arm and gave it a squeeze, as if trying to take courage from his presence.

He patted her hand and when he started to walk forward, it took her a heartbeat to come along, but she finally moved with him rather than release her hold.

They approached the priest and when they came to a stop, Oliver said, "Father Tunstall? Hello, I am Oliver Graham, and I assume you already know Alice Munro."

The man's dark eyes studied him for just a moment too long before

he finally nodded. "Of course, I know Alice. And I've heard of you as well. You are Lord Burbidge's new man."

"Yes." It occurred to Oliver to wonder if Lord Burbidge supplemented this man's salary, and he glanced at Alice, to see that her face was frozen and uncomfortable.

For a moment he wondered if this was such a good idea, but what else were they to do? Lord Burbidge had to be stopped before he ended up killing Alice, and they couldn't sit back and do nothing. At the moment this seemed like their best choice.

"We wondered if we might talk to you in private?" Oliver said, and glanced around at the boys in the room.

Curiosity gleamed in the other man's gaze as he glanced between the two of them. "Of course, of course." He clapped his hands, "Manny, Adrian, Paul, go outside and feed the livestock and stay there until I come and get you."

The boys were quick to obey, and soon it was just the three of them.

Again, the priest glanced between Oliver and Alice. "What is this about?"

From the tension in Alice's hands, he doubted she would be capable of starting the conversation.

He glanced at her. "May I?"

She gave a jerky nod, and fear stiffened her expression.

The sooner they got this over with, the better.

He thought about the anti-harassment policy they had in place at his work. It was very strict, and very clear, and his employees knew going in that there would be no tolerance for any type of harassment.

This moment made him appreciate that policy all the more.

He just needed to think of this man as an HR supervisor, and they were there to report an indiscretion, with the hope that justice would take its proper course.

He met the other man's gaze. "Lord Burbidge is harassing Alice. He is a married man, and he has no business looking at Alice, or saying suggestive things to her, or intimidating her in such a way. We are hoping that as the man's religious advisor, you might step in and help."

Father Tunstall's gaze was sharp as he glanced between the two of them once more. "Harassing? What do you mean?"

Oliver thought he'd been perfectly clear, but if he needed to repeat it, he would. "He is sexually menacing Alice."

Alice gasped.

Oliver patted her hand where she clung to his arm. "He is trying to intimidate her into having sexual relations with him."

Was that blunt enough for the older man?

The priest put a hand on his heart as if he were having palpitations, so Oliver supposed he'd been more than clear this time.

The priest looked at Alice. "Is this true?"

Oliver felt a surge of irritation at the man's skeptical tone. He glanced down to see that Alice was frozen, and incapable of speech, and a fierce rush of protectiveness rose within him. "We are hoping that you can intervene on Alice's behalf, and speak to Lord Burbidge about his behavior."

The priest's face filled with fury. "How dare you? How dare you impugn the honor of Lord Burbidge, who is known to be a kind and generous land owner. He is involved with his tenants, making sure that all are cared for, and you would dare to try and tarnish his reputation in such a way?"

Oliver had stiffened throughout the other man's speech. "Are you mad? Is there no recourse for a young lady trapped in such circumstances? You are her spiritual advisor, and you will not stand up for her? You will not call out a reprobate trying to induce a young lady into an intimate relationship?"

The priest sputtered, espousing yet more good deeds that Lord Burbidge was responsible for, and Oliver felt like his eyes were burning with the rage and disgust he felt.

Oliver himself had ridden around the property with the man, and was less than impressed with Lord Burbidge's level of care and concern toward his tenants.

The man was a selfish prat, only interested in his own self-indulgent concerns.

"Do not think I have not heard of you!?" Father Tunstall pointed his finger in Oliver's face. "You are a violent man! You struck Mr. Reardon in the head yesterday knocking him unconscious. Perhaps it is your own behavior which should be under scrutiny?"

Oliver wasn't surprised that the other man had heard of the altercation. He was sure such juicy gossip was too irresistible not to pass on.

"Really?" His body seemed to course with heat and he loosened his grip on Alice's hand so as not to crush it. "And what of Alice's father, Mr. Munro? Did you hear what Mr. Reardon did to that man? The man is a brute and a bully."

"I will not be drawn into gossip with a scoundrel. I will, however, be talking to Lord Burbidge about these accusations against him."

Oliver's temper flared to scorching. He didn't think he'd ever felt so angry in his entire life. "Oh, that's bloody brilliant!"

The priest gasped and crossed himself.

"You are going to go to the man who is sexually harassing a young lady, and tell him that she has lodged a complaint against him? You're

supposed to be a man of God!"

The man sputtered for a moment. "You ... you foul-mouthed savage! I am a man of God, which gives me insight into things that other people cannot see."

Oliver snorted. "It seems I also have the gift of insight. I can quite clearly see that you are dependent upon Lord Burbidge's good will, and will not speak against him, no matter what he does wrong."

The priest lifted a finger and pointed. "And I can quite clearly see that you are here to smear a good man's name in hopes of getting a payment for yourself!" Spittle flew from his mouth. "I can also see your interest in young Alice here. She has always been a good girl, and you are the one who is influencing her toward evil deeds! You have not been with Lord Burbidge long, you have seen his wealth, and have attached yourself to a pretty young girl. You are stirring up trouble, sir!"

At that, Alice sobbed, let go of Oliver, and then turned and ran toward the front doors.

Oliver's face twisted into a sneer and he leaned in toward the shorter man. "You are no man of God! You are in this to line your own pockets. You don't care for the people of this parish, you only care for the continued patronage of Lord Burbidge. The things that you are accusing me of, you are guilty of yourself. That a young girl should go unprotected by a man of God is disgusting!"

As the priest sputtered, eyes bulging and looking apoplectic, Oliver turned and left.

When he reached the door, he threw it open, and could clearly see Alice running up the street and he took off after her.

A heaviness had settled in his chest. He'd only made things worse for Alice, and somehow, someday, he had to fix this. Today, before things went south.

A cold sliver seemed to sink into his heart. Could his coming here have been the catalyst that got her killed? That couldn't be possible, could it?

He caught up to her on the outskirts of the village, gently settled his hands on her shoulders, and pulled her to a stop.

She was sobbing, and when he turned her, she threw herself at him, and he closed his eyes as he wrapped his arms around her.

"Hush, now," he said, gratified that she clung to him. "I'll figure this out."

And he would.

If he wanted to keep her alive, he'd have to.

OLIVER STARTED WALKING with her in the opposite direction and Alice tried to stop her tears.

When Oliver passed the turnoff to Rosewood Manor, she was surprised, but glad for the extra time to compose herself. The last thing she needed was anyone witnessing her upset.

Why had she let Oliver talk her into seeing the priest? He'd seemed so sure, so positive that speaking to the priest, and having him talk to Lord Burbidge would put a stop to the harassment, as Oliver called it.

Now what was going to happen? When Lord Burbidge found out what they'd said about him, what would he do? Would he turn them out? Ask them to leave the property, and the safety they had at Rosewood?

Would her father be turned out as well? What would happen? She didn't know, and her uncertainty had her sobbing all over again.

"Hush, now," said Oliver. "We will figure this out, I promise."

They walked a little further along the road and Oliver pulled her over to sit on a stone that was on the side of the road.

In happier days, she'd sat in this exact location with her mother, and that brought more tears to her eyes. What would her mother say about this situation?

The priest had said she was to blame. Could that somehow be true? Oliver hugged her and she pulled away, worried that someone would see them, and feeling somehow undeserving of any comfort.

"What am I going to do?"

"Whatever we decide, we'll do it together. You will always have me at your side."

She finally started to calm. "What if Lord Burbidge turns us out?"

Oliver was silent beside her for a long moment, and just when she thought he would not say another word, he broke the silence. "I have friends that are coming here in two days, and after that none of this is going to be a problem, I assure you."

She felt a spark of hope that was quickly dampened. "Do you mean they are coming to take you away from here?" Fear widened her eyes and left her breathless.

"I mean exactly that," he said. "And I'm taking you with me."

Her emotions were so jumbled, jumping sharply from one feeling to the next, that she leaned against him, exhausted. "I cannot leave my father."

"Then he will come with us."

"Your friends, they would agree to this?"

"Yes, they absolutely will," he said. "They will be more than thrilled to see you. The both of you."

She tried to keep a tight grip on the hope that surged at his words. "Where will they take us?"



“To London.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have a home there anymore?”

“Not at the moment, but I will.”

Again, a tiny spark of hope flared to life. “All right. All right,” she said. “What will we do in the meanwhile?”

“Maybe I should talk to Lady Burbidge after all and see if she can help us. See if she can keep her husband in check.”

She swallowed. “You do not believe they will turn us out?”

“Lord Burbidge is far too greedy to turn me out, and if he turns you out, I will leave as well.”

“But your friends? How will they find us?”

“I guess we’ll just have to hang around here, until they come. But I don’t think it’s going to come to that. I don’t believe Lord Burbidge will let me go so easily. What we have to worry about in the meanwhile, is just keeping you safe until my friends arrive.”

She sat there, beside him, feeling the warmth of his body against hers, and for the first time in a long while she did not feel alone.

Two days was a short amount of time. If they could weather Lord Burbidge’s wrath until then, they could simply leave and hopefully move on to a better life.

She glanced up at Oliver and wondered what that life would entail.

He’d kissed her, several times now. He’d stood up for her, and had his arm around her even now. He’d asked her to marry him.

She’d known him such a short amount of time.

He seemed to be an honorable, kind, just man, but she didn’t truly know him.

The thought of going off to an unknown future, in an unknown city, totally dependent upon Oliver’s goodwill, lit yet another spark of fear.

Every one of her choices, left her feeling helpless.

## Chapter 18

They had not traveled so far down the road that they couldn't see the turnoff to Rosewood.

When Oliver saw that Father Tunstall was headed in their direction and then turned off toward the manor, he knew exactly what the other man was doing.

"Look," Oliver said, drawing her attention to the man.

Alice gasped.

"Don't worry," Oliver said. "He's obviously going to talk to Lord Burbidge. Let's follow and we'll get this all out in the open."

He stood, and tugged an obviously reluctant Alice off the stone. "This is good. This is what needs to happen right now. Trust me, when everyone lays their cards on the table at the same time, that's when you get results."

He put an arm around her and urged her forward and the two of them trailed behind the priest, who, in turn, noticed them and made a muffled sound of disgust, before ignoring them as he practically stomped his way to the manor.

Oliver's own disgust with the man grew as he watched him make his way to the front door and use the knocker.

The two of them stood back and waited, Alice trembling under the protection of his arm.

Oliver was calm, and ready for the unpleasantness to come.

When Mrs. Quinn answered the door, the priest went inside, and Oliver and Alice followed.

"I would like to speak to Lord Burbidge about these two miscreants." Father Tunstall's tone was loud and demanding.

Oliver nodded at the older lady. "And make sure that Lady Burbidge is present, as well."

Mrs. Quinn only hesitated a moment, her gaze flickering between the three of them before she went into the breakfast room.

"Father Tunstall and Mr. Graham and Miss Munro are here to see you."

"Well, tell them to come in," Lord Burbidge said, his tone impatient.

The three of them went inside the dining room where the entire family was gathered. At their appearance, expressions ranged from surprised to wary.

Lord Burbidge looked at Oliver and Alice, and his expression turned sour as he took in the way she clung to him.

“Lord Burbidge,” Father Tunstall’s tone was still angry and belligerent, “I need to talk to you on a matter of great import.”

Lord Burbidge looked at his boys, his daughter, and then at Lady Burbidge. He stood. “Certainly. Come with me into the study.”

“Lady Burbidge needs to hear this, as well,” Oliver said.

Lord Burbidge looked like he would protest, but Lady Burbidge quickly stood and rounded the table and as a group they headed into the study.

Lord Burbidge immediately went to his desk and sat behind it, and Lady Burbidge stood at his side.

“Now,” Lord Burbidge said. “What is this about?”

“These two,” the priest pointed at Oliver and Alice, “have come to me to complain that you have lecherous intentions toward Miss Munro.” The priest said it like it was the most ridiculous thing in the world, when everyone in the room knew that it wasn’t.

Lord Burbidge glanced at them both and said, “That is ridiculous.”

“Of course, it is. Here you are, a happily married man, who would never do such a thing. These two are calling your honor into question, and such accusations cannot stand.”

Oliver would have loved nothing more than to trounce the brown-nosing little twerp, but he didn’t necessarily see it as a bad thing to lay their cards on the table, so to speak.

“Sir,” Oliver said. “While you might not see anything wrong with harassing the staff, you must realize what a bad position you place a young lady such as Alice in. She is a dependent. You are her employer. It cannot stand. You need to leave Alice alone.”

Lord Burbidge glanced at his wife, and then pressed his hands on his desk. “And this is how you repay my generosity in taking you on as an employee? By bringing baseless accusations against me?”

Lord Burbidge’s voice was completely calm, without a hint of indignation.

“No, I repay you for taking me on as an employee by working hard and making you more money. This is another matter entirely.”

“Well, obviously, the girl has mistaken the matter. Young girls, especially pretty ones, often mistake admiration for a job well done as something else entirely.”

“Alice, what do you have to say about the matter?” Lady Burbidge asked.

Oliver wanted to speak up, to protect her in any way he could, but

knew the question needed to be answered by her. He still had his arm around her, and he gave her a squeeze.

"I ... I ..." her gaze dropped to the floor and she swallowed hard. Fear was stark upon her face for all to see, and the priest snorted.

"Do you see the guilt in her face? This woman was born in sin. Everyone knows it. What do you expect of such a female?"

Oliver lifted his chin. "How dare you? And you call yourself a man of God? A more judgmental, supercilious, and condescending person I have yet to meet. How can you care about the people in your charge when your only concern is yourself?"

The priest spluttered.

"Just shut up," Oliver said sharply "and let her have a chance to speak."

Alice glanced at Oliver, gratitude and fear in her expression. "Perhaps," she was breathing harshly and she dropped her gaze again. "Perhaps I have mistaken Lord Burbidge's interest."

"There, do you see?" Father Tunstall gestured to Alice. "The girl is to blame."

"Again, I would entreat you to *shut your mouth*," Oliver said, and looked at Lord Burbidge. "She's obviously too afraid to confront you. I, however, am not. Any interest you have in Alice is over, as of now."

"Really." The priest huffed out. "It looks to me like you need to turn both of them out, my lord. Such insubordination is not to be borne."

Oliver sent Lord Burbidge a challenging look. "By all means, throw us out."

Before Lord Burbidge could say anything, his wife interceded. "Isaac, he seems very protective of the girl. Obviously, there has been a misunderstanding here, but I believe it is easy enough to see how to rectify the situation. Father Tunstall, why don't you marry the two of them. That would seem the obvious solution, and then our household can settle once more."

There was a gleam of something in Lady Burbidge's gaze, a vicious amusement perhaps, as she cast a sly glance in her husband's direction.

Lord Burbidge's cool expression slipped, and he was quick to protest. "This is not the dark ages, my dear. As land owners, we do not get to decide who the servants marry."

"But it is the perfect solution. After all, you would not wish anyone to think that you are chasing servant girls around the manor, now, would you? That would be very poor form, indeed."

Lord Burbidge shot his wife a look of active dislike.

"It is the perfect solution. You do not wish to lose Oliver, and I have no wish to turn Alice out in disgrace."

“It is a good solution,” the priest agreed. “I could announce the banns come Sunday.”

“Mr. Graham?” Lady Burbidge looked at him.

“Yes, if she’ll have me, I would love to marry Alice.”

Lady Burbidge turned toward Alice. “What do you say, dear?”

Alice, her expression still fearful, glanced around, and Oliver found himself holding his breath.

The scared look she cast him was like a brand to his heart. Again, she wasn’t jumping at the chance to have him. Maybe he should take a hint.

“Obviously, you are pressuring the girl,” Lord Burbidge said. “Into something she does not want.”

Oliver’s heartbeat faltered, though he kept his expression neutral.

Lord Burbidge stood. “Father Tunstall, I thank you for bringing this to my attention, as this is my household, I will attend to matters as I see fit. Good day, sir.”

Father Tunstall looked slightly insulted, but he finally gave Lord Burbidge a nod, and exited the room.

Once the door was closed behind him, Lord Burbidge turned to Oliver. “As for the two of you, I believe it is time to stop telling tales and get back to work.”

Oliver lifted his chin. “Just as long as we understand each other, sir?”

“Oh, I understand, well enough. You are both excused.”

Alice was the first to turn and grasp the doorknob and slip out, and after one last glance at the unhappy couple behind him, Oliver followed.

All in all, the confrontation could have been worse. They just had to hold out for a couple more days, and they’d be able to put all of this behind them.

Shining a light on Lord Burbidge’s harassment might put an end to it. Most men in such a situation, would back off for a while at least, wouldn’t they? Perhaps permanently?

Oliver might have taken a blow to his own heart and ego, but maybe, just maybe, they’d just put a stop to whatever events had led to Alice’s premature death.

He could only hope so.



WHEN OLIVER CALLED HER NAME, Alice continued up the stairs without looking back.

She felt ... she didn’t know what she felt.

With tears of humiliation burning her eyes, she walked the upper

hall to Lady Burbidge's room, went inside and shut the door behind her.

"Where have you been?" Fiona asked.

Alice thought about using her father as an excuse, but the entire household would soon know about the meeting downstairs, so she said, "I was downstairs speaking with Lord and Lady Burbidge."

Fiona's eyes widened. "Why?"

She simply could not give the other woman a truthful answer, and she finally gave her a half-truth. "Oliver and I are thinking of marrying."

Fiona let out a shriek. "I knew it! I knew the two of you had something going on."

Alice forced a smile as the other girl hugged her. "Nothing is settled yet. We were just asking permission to court."

Fiona's good cheer was not dampened. "Do not worry a bit. If Oliver has asked to court you, it will all come out well."

Fiona told her about a London couple who'd married in the last year, as Alice helped straighten the room, make the bed, and dust the uncarpeted parts of the floor.

When they'd finished cleaning, Lady Burbidge came into the room, looked at both girls, and then said, "Fiona, you are excused for the moment, go and see if Mrs. Quinn needs you for anything."

Fiona sent Alice a smile, and then was quick to do their lady's bidding.

As soon as the door closed, Lady Burbidge said, "Have a seat, will you?" she indicated the chair in front of the vanity.

Lady Burbidge leaned against one of the bedposts and looked at Alice, who could not hold her gaze.

The older woman took a breath. "Alice, I do believe that marrying Oliver could be the best solution here. Sometimes we women do not have many choices in life, but marriage is one of the few that we do have. Mr. Graham is interested in you. He seems an intelligent, well-spoken young man. As a maid in my house, you could do far worse when it comes to marriage."

Alice gave a slight nod, even as feelings of helplessness overwhelmed her. "My lady, I just met Oliver. I do like him, but I barely know him."

"You would come to know him in time." Lady Burbidge pushed off the bedpost and walked to the window. She folded her arms and looked outside. "I understand my husband has made your situation here untenable. If he has his way, you would be ruined, much as your own mother was. You could end up having his child, and if that happened you would not be able to stay here, and would be moved away from those you know and love."

Alice's cheeks were hot with shame for attracting this woman's husband in such a way.

"You do understand that I am trying to help you?"

"Your help is most welcome. I ... I hope you know that I have never encouraged your husband in such a way."

Lady Burbidge continued to look out the window, as if she couldn't bear to look at Alice while having this conversation. "I do not blame you for the way things are, but having you here, available to my husband, has been a hardship all the same."

Alice's cheeks flushed hotter and tears filled her eyes. She swallowed against the tightness in her throat. "I swear to you, my lady, on my mother's grave, I would never do anything to disappoint you."

This was agonizing. She wanted to say more to convince her mistress, but was unable to think of the words to convince her.

She glanced up to see Lady Burbidge watching her once more. "My dear, you may not have known Mr. Graham for long, but in my opinion, it is a good match. He is young, intelligent, and motivated. And he would be lucky to have you. You are young, beautiful, and educated in speech, manners, and reading by your mother. You would be an asset to an ambitious young man. Would marrying him really be so bad?"

"As I said, I barely know him."

"I barely knew my husband when I married him, though I suppose you won't think that a good example for why you should attach yourself to Oliver." Lady Burbidge paced to the fireplace. "I am sorry I cannot offer you a better solution. I just want you to think about it. But know that I would be well pleased if you were to marry Oliver. I also believe my husband's attentions to you would come to an end. Do we understand each other?"

Alice nodded once. "Yes, my lady." She understood her lady well. If Alice wanted to keep the peace, she was to marry Oliver.

Lady Burbidge nodded once. "All right, you're excused."

Alice, feeling as if the weight of the world was on her shoulders, stood and left the room.



OLIVER HAD WANTED to leave the house and clear his head, but instead, he'd gotten some work done and drawn up some new plans for Burbidge's empire.

Ha. Good luck implementing the plans without Oliver there.

He was working at a desk in the library, avoiding the man, and yet keeping himself available for Alice if she needed to talk, or needed

him for anything.

Which, she apparently didn't.

He felt like he'd taken a kick to the gut.

Doing nothing was killing him. How he'd love to have his sports car out front. He'd settle Alice inside of it, and roar away from this pitiful place of employment, and take her away from it all. Give her freedom, safety, and choices.

Of course, she probably wouldn't choose him.

Ever since he'd seen Alice in the garden that day with Harry and Daphne, she'd been on his mind. Yes, he'd wanted to save her. And yes, somewhere along the way, he'd hoped that the two of them would eventually become a couple.

Daphne had warned him against white knight syndrome, and urged him to do this for the right reasons.

Apparently, he'd gotten lost somewhere along the way.

Perhaps Alice didn't think he was any better than Burbidge?

He knew that wasn't true. He was just beating himself up because she'd hurt him by not jumping at the opportunity to marry him.

He made a scoffing noise. Perhaps being one of the most eligible bachelors in London for the last five years, mostly because of his money, had really gone to his head.

So, she didn't want him. He still needed to get his head on straight, and remember why he was doing this.

To save Alice from murder. To give her a second chance.

He sighed and tossed the quill pen aside. She was beautiful in any century. She also was kind, sweet, funny, a joy to be around.

Of course, she wasn't going to tie herself to the first man who came along. He just needed to up his game. She'd only known him for a very short while.

Just because she wasn't jumping at the chance to marry him today, didn't mean he didn't have a chance. He needed to court her. He needed time.

Something they didn't have.

If today's confrontation with Burbidge had altered her history, if somehow the man, being called out, was now going to leave her alone, maybe she had time.

Maybe she'd live her life here without him.

Maybe he'd done what he'd come here to do.

Of course, Burbidge was only one of his suspects. Reardon, even the priest, or some random person Oliver wasn't even aware of could have murdered her.

He still had to get her out of there.

He let out another breath, then rose to his feet. He needed to go outside and clear his head.



He went out the front doors so as to avoid the other servants, and then went around the manor, and back to the gardens, hoping to run into Alice, but not surprised when he didn't.

He walked toward the arbor on the off chance that she was inside the garden.

He did want her, he wanted to marry her, but not this way. He didn't wish her to feel trapped. He wanted her to want him back.

"Hey, Oliver! Wait up!"

Oliver turned to see one of the twins coming toward him. "Hello. Is it Jonathan or Jeremy? I'm not sure which one you are."

"I'm Jeremy."

Oh, the good twin. The other one showed signs of being a brat. "Jeremy, where are you headed?"

"I'm on an errand for my father."

"Are you, now?"

"Yes, he wants me to do this for him." Jeremy's leg shot out, and he tripped and pushed Oliver at the same time and Oliver ended up sprawled in the grass.

His brows rose as he looked up at Jeremy. "What was that for?"

"That was for trying to ruin my father's good name. You can keep your mouth shut from now on, or there will be more where that came from."

Oliver, ready for another attack, slowly stood and brushed at his slacks. He felt sorry for the kid. Had he just found out about his father's proclivities? Had it embarrassed him? Still, he couldn't just let this pass. "Do you want to come at me now, when I'm ready for you?"

Jeremy smirked and started walking backward, a big grin on his face. "If I come at you now, you could say I started it, and that you were defending yourself. This way, I get to see you sprawled in the dirt like the fool you are."

"Oh, I'm the fool here, am I?"

"That's what it looks like to me. And by-the-by, I believe those are your only pair of breeches? It looks like you will need to get little Alice to sew them for you."

Oliver glanced down to see that he had a tear in his only pair of slacks. Someone needed to teach the brat a lesson and, with the way Oliver was feeling, he'd be glad to sign on for the job.

"Is this who you want to be? A little thug who strikes at people when they aren't looking, throws insults, and then runs back to his daddy?"

At that, Jeremy's face turned ugly. "And, by the way, it's Jonathan. Just like everyone else, you are too stupid to tell us apart."

"Oh, I suspect it'll get easier and easier as the years pass. It's a little difficult to hide the sneaky-little-weasel look for too long. It's

already starting to give you away.”

Jonathan made a rude gesture with his hand, turned around, and took off like the weasel that he was.

The apple really did not fall far from the tree.

## Chapter 19

With his hands stuffed in his pockets, Oliver wandered inside the garden, only to find himself alone. He supposed it had been too much to expect that Alice would be there.

He roamed past the different colored roses, enjoying the scent, making his way toward a different exit. When he approached the arch, Reardon stepped inside, blocking his way.

Oliver stopped, his heart jumping in his chest, before settling into a faster rhythm.

Surprise, surprise.

His hands clenched and unclenched in his pockets. He smiled at the other man, genuinely glad to see him.

He'd felt like crushing something all day, and if Reardon was now going to give him the opportunity to do exactly that, well, he'd thank the man and gladly.

Oliver widened his stance. "Come back for some more, have you?"

He waited for the other man to make the first move.

Reardon didn't.

Oliver raised a brow.

The other man bared his teeth. "I bet you thinks you is a real smart one."

Oliver grinned, deliberately trying to antagonize. "Actually, I do."

"Getting the drop on me like that, knocking me down, making me look bad."

"Oh, I thought you liked doing things that way. What's good for you, isn't good for me?"

"How's that?"

"When you hit me in the gut the other day, like a coward, before I knew it was coming?"

Reardon still didn't come toward him, and Oliver deliberately kept his hands in his pockets, and his limbs loose, trying his best to look unthreatening.

If he hadn't met Harry, and if Harry hadn't taught him to fight, he'd be pissing himself right about now, but as it was, all he felt was fierce anticipation.

He could tell the other man seemed confused, and perhaps expected Oliver to run, and now he didn't know what to do. "I has a message for you."

"Is that so?"

"You is to stay away from Alice. If you do not, you might find you are not as valuable to the master as you thinks you are."

"Is that so? When were you told to pass this message on?"

"Within the hour," Reardon said.

Oliver felt something within him tighten, and anger flashed. So, Lord Burbidge was not backing off on his obsession with Alice, after all.

Reardon's fists opened and closed.

Unable to help himself, sick of the whole situation, but denied his real enemy, Oliver lifted a hand out of one pocket and made a come-hither motion, the same one Harry had used on him a hundred or more times.

The other man's face flared with temper, but he didn't move forward.

That's right, bullies only liked to strike out when they were assured a positive outcome.

"No?" Oliver asked, his tone mocking.

Reardon's face twisted and he spit on the ground between them, and then exited the garden.

Denied his prey, denied the fight, Oliver shoved his hands back into his pockets, and waited for his heart beat to slow.

If Reardon was to be believed, Lord Burbidge was still after Alice.

His temper burned. He thought about going after Reardon. He started forward, went underneath the arbor, and was about to call the other man's name, when a hand landed on his shoulder, making him jump.

"Do not do it," Mr. Munro said in a low voice. "He will kill you."

Oliver hadn't even heard the other man come up behind him. He watched Reardon go and then released a breath.

"Come on, lad, I'd like to talk to you."

With one last look, Oliver followed Mr. Munro to his cottage.



MR. MUNRO LET OLIVER go in front of him, and then shut the door. He lifted a hand toward the kitchen table. "Please, have a seat."

Oliver settled himself, and when the other man sat across from him, waited for him to speak.

"You are a good one, Mr. Graham. And I can see you are honorable and wish to do the right thing."

Oliver could hear a but ... coming, and held his peace.

Mr. Munro set his hand on the table, the one with the broken finger, and Oliver's gaze was drawn toward it.

"I heard what happened today with Father Tunstall and Lord and Lady Burbidge."

Oliver tensed, ready for the other man to take him to task for the disastrous way the day had unfolded.

"I also heard what Reardon said to you about Lord Burbidge." Mr. Munro drew in a breath and let it out slowly. "I love working with plants, and making them come to life. I love planning out a new plot of land, imagining what it could look like, and then coaxing the plants to do exactly as I'd hoped."

Where was this going?

Mr. Munro looked down at the table. "For a variety of reasons, it sometimes does not work out. Death, disease, too much water, bad seeds. My plants do not always thrive the way I'd intended. Sometimes I'll see a whole new perspective after I've started, and entirely new direction, and I'll gladly follow it until something turns out special and amazing."

Oliver, having often had the same types of experiences in business, nodded.

"Sometimes," he continued, "something bad can be introduced. A weed choking a stem that I didn't see in time. And while I am enjoying the plants, their life is being choked out of them from a greedy grip of a noxious weed or some such."

Mr. Munro placed his other hand on the table and looked down at his injured finger. "I know that the rose garden belongs to Lady Burbidge, and is her pride and joy, but I've been able to sneak in some plants over the years, simply to tickle my own fancy."

Oliver's lips curved. "I heard Lady Burbidge call you an artist."

Mr. Munro, somber until that point, smiled. "When Alice was born, she was like a miracle to her mother and me. Pretty as a sunburst, with her blue eyes and light fuzz on her head, she looked like a dandelion."

He glanced up. "My wife was much like Alice in temperament; sweet, gentle, and a real lady. Did you know she was aristocracy before she married me?"

He did not. "Is there a chance her mother's family could step in and help?"

Mr. Munro shook his head. "They would not help their daughter, so I doubt they would concern themselves with their granddaughter, either."

Oliver nodded and Mr. Munro continued his story.

"She was much too good for me, that was clear from the

beginning, though she never thought so. She was a lovely wife, and a wonderful mother.”

Mr. Munro’s gaze dropped again and he scratched at a dent in the wood. “Before Alice was born, her mother and I had some troubles, as her mother had not been treated kindly when I came upon her. After Alice was born, it was like the sun rose for both of us. I wanted to name her Rose, you know, but my wife insisted upon Alice, after her grandmother. She said it would be too confusing for me, working with roses all day, to come home and call my daughter Rose as well.”

He chuckled softly.

Oliver slowly relaxed back against the chair. He’d expected the man to take him to task for getting Alice into yet more trouble, and was starting to feel bewildered by the whole conversation. He drew in a breath to address the elephant in the room, but Mr. Munro held up his hand. “Let me finish, lad.”

The older man sat back in his seat. “I was watching the sunrise one morning, not long after Alice was born, and the lightening sky made me think of my daughter. My wife was so happy she’d been born, and I was so delighted to slip into the house any chance I could, to hold my daughter. Anyhow, the lightening sky turned a beautiful shade of lilac, and gave me the idea to create a lilac rose in honor of Alice. It took a few years, but lady Burbidge obtained some clippings from China, and Alice’s rose finally blossomed.”

He glanced up. “This is all to say, that she’s always been a joy to me, from the moment she was born. She’s not mine by blood, but she is the daughter of my heart, and I would do anything to protect her. Rip out any weed that threatened her.”

That didn’t surprise Oliver in the least, as he felt exactly the same.

“Alice isn’t yours?”

“She is, though her mother was with child when I married her.”

Oliver nodded.

“I feel my daughter is in danger, and as I’ve already lost my wife, I do not believe I could go on if I lost Alice as well.”

Oliver felt a pang in his chest. He knew for a fact that was true. The man had passed away within a year of his daughter’s death. Meeting the man, he had no doubt he’d died of grief.

Mr. Munro drew in a breath, and held it for a moment before he finally said, “Before you arrived, I had considered killing Lord Burbidge if he harmed her. But if I’ve a murder staining my soul, I’ll not be able to see my sweet wife or daughter again. But to protect her ... I do not think there is anything I would not do to keep her safe.”

Oliver did not know what to say to that. The thought of this gentle man being driven to murder to protect his daughter was so abhorrent to him he felt like killing Burbidge himself.

“Matters do feel hopeless,” Mr. Munro said quietly, and then he met Oliver’s gaze once again. “You strike me as an intelligent young man, and as I do not know what to do, I am hoping that you might have a plan?”

Oliver drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

“*M*r. Munro, I would like to tell you something. You’re going to have a hard time believing it, but I hope that you will anyway.”

Mr. Monroe sat back in his chair again. “Go on.”

Oliver took a breath, and decided to just say it. If the man thought he was crazy, was it really going to make a difference? The bottom line was that they both needed to be on high alert, until Oliver could get Alice out of there.

So, he just said it. “I met your daughter in the rose garden a couple of hundred years from now. In the future. She was a ghost, and she’d been murdered and buried in the garden. I looked at the church records, and found that an Alice Munro had disappeared on July 6, 1771, and was never heard from again. That is two days from now.”

Mr. Monroe was wide-eyed and staring.

Oliver tapped a finger on the table. “I paid a witch to save her life, to give her another chance, and instead the witch sent me back here to do it myself.”

Mr. Monroe’s mouth had parted, and he was looking at Oliver, fear and surprise in his expression.

When he didn’t speak, Oliver ended with, “My plan to confront Lord Burbidge and embarrass him into leaving Alice alone does not seem to have worked. A decent man would have been mortified to have that sort of attention called to his nefarious actions, but then, we are not dealing with a decent man, are we?”

Oliver sat back and waited for Mr. Munro to condemn him, call him a liar, kick him out of his house, but the other man opened and closed his mouth for a moment, and then finally said, “You came here for Alice?”

“I did.”

“Does she know any of this?”

Oliver shook his head. “You are the only one I’ve told.”

Mr. Munro pushed back his chair, stood, and walked over to the window overlooking the garden. “And Lord Burbidge *kills* her?”

“No one was ever prosecuted for her murder. In fact, I don’t



believe her body was ever found. In the church records it said that she left, never to be seen again. When I met her in the garden, she told us herself that she'd been murdered."

"Ye are not touched in the head, are ye, lad?" Mr. Munroe's accent had roughened.

Oliver shook his head and waited.

Mr. Munro gulped a few times, and finally said, "With the threat to Alice, I must allow myself to be convinced. I'd rather err on the side of caution, and place my trust in you, and end up the fool, versus condemn you for a liar and lose my Alice. Do you have a plan?"

Oliver let out a breath. He hated to tell the other man the entirety of his plan in case it didn't work out.

"Because if you don't, why don't you simply marry my daughter? I could talk her into having you."

A spear of pain pierced Oliver's heart. "I'll keep her safe, but she doesn't need to marry me in order to have my help."

"Don't let rejection sting your pride, laddie. Marriages start in all sorts of ways."

Perhaps they did, but he wasn't there yet.

Wickham had said he'd be in the garden in nine days, which was the day after tomorrow. Here was where they needed to make their escape.

"I have a friend who is coming to get me in two days," he finally said.

Mr. Munro looked startled. "A friend?"

Oliver felt sick to his stomach. It was cutting it too close. "Is there anyone nearby you could stay with until that time?"

Mr. Munro shook his head. "None that would go against Lord Burbidge."

The power the man held over everyone's lives was simply appalling.

Mr. Munro looked at him hopefully. "Mayhap you might have some friends we could travel to? Perhaps we could meet your friend elsewhere?"

Again, Oliver thought about trying to make it to Scotland, just the three of them traveling on the road, but remembered his journey on the way out, and how he'd been glad of Wilmot's protection.

"I'm sorry, no. We'll have to wait for his arrival."

## Chapter 21

Oliver had always had many opportunities in his life.

His time here had highlighted how much he'd taken them for granted.

How was a man supposed to get ahead in life in this period of time?

The reality was that he couldn't just jump in a car and drive where he needed to be. He could decide he didn't like a position, and could simply find another.

If they left home, they left themselves open to attack, starvation, and the unknown.

He didn't like it.

Mr. Munro was still looking at him hopefully, and though Oliver did have a plan, he wished it was a better one.

If he couldn't go anywhere, and he couldn't call on reinforcements, he had to wait until Wickham showed up.

He could talk Alice into marrying him, but wasn't convinced that even if that happened, Lord Burbidge would back down.

Lord Burbidge needed to be distracted.

What else was he interested in besides Alice?

Money.

Oliver had come up with immediate ways to improve Lord Burbidge's business interests, but if he could come up with something big, something that would force Lord Burbidge to travel, something that would catch his attention ...

"Where does Lord Burbidge travel in a year?"

Mr. Munro looked pensive. "In the spring time he goes to London for a few months every year, but he just arrived back from there."

"Where else?"

"He goes to parties and the like when he's invited."

Oliver had no way of getting Lord Burbidge an invitation to anything. Not unless he forged one. Which he wasn't completely against, but there had to be a better idea.

"Where else does he go?"

"He travels with Mr. Esterford to buy seed for the crops."

“Is he anywhere close to buying seed?”

Mr. Munro snorted and shook his head. “We’re headed into summer, laddie. We don’t purchase seed until the fall.”

Oliver would have to go through Lord Burbidge’s accounts to see if he could come up with some sort of business deal that would get the other man out of there, while allowing them time for Wickham to arrive.

He’d have to see if he could find some way to get rid of the other man quickly, efficiently, and alone. “I’ll see if I can find something,” Oliver said.

Their gazes met again, and Oliver noted the determination in the older man’s eyes. They shared a common goal. Keep Alice safe and alive.

“I’ll get back to you later,” Oliver said.

Mr. Munro walked Oliver to the door and opened it. There didn’t seem to be anything left to say, and so Oliver gave him a nod, and they both went in different directions.

Somehow, someway, they would keep Alice safe.

## Chapter 22

“No,” Lord Burbidge said, his tone emphatic.

Oliver was still having a hard time getting used to the word no, especially when he was the one who had the higher IQ, and he'd thought this out carefully.

Not that people didn't try to dissuade him at work, but ultimately, the company was his, and what he said went.

He looked at the man seated at the desk across from him. Perhaps, just perhaps Oliver had also let power go to his head.

He might have to rethink his position more often, if there was any chance that he came across looking like the totalitarian in front of him.

Apparently, Lord Burbidge did think that he needed to explain himself, because after tapping his fingers on the desk for a moment, he said, “I do not have a good relationship with my neighbor.”

Frustration rose within Oliver. He'd just spent over an hour brainstorming with the steward to come up with this plan, and even though he had ulterior motives for doing so, the plan was sound.

And now they couldn't go through with it because Lord Burbidge was a dick?

It figured.

Still, it was the best idea he'd come up with and so he at least had to try. “As he is your closest neighbor, and you do share a border with him, I believe if the proposal is set before him, he will agree to it.”

Lord Burbidge sighed. “I'll tell you what. He is to be at the house party in two days, and you can speak with him then if you like.”

He'd actually been hoping to talk Lord Burbidge out of the house party, in favor of this proposition.

“Why wait?” Oliver asked. “Couldn't you at least invite him to dinner, say, tomorrow night?”

Lord Burbidge took a breath, only to release another sigh. “Oliver, I love your passion, I do. But honestly, you seem to be in a big hurry for such a young man. The night of the house party will be quite soon enough for you to discuss your ideas with Lord Anderson.”

Lord Burbidge's hard tone said he was done with the conversation.

Frustration burned behind Oliver's chest as he forced himself to hold his tongue. How did people stand not being in charge? It was so frustrating to have to ask others for permission for every little thing.

He considered some of the other ideas that he and the steward had come up with, they weren't as viable, but intelligence wasn't Lord Burbidge's strong suit, so perhaps they would appeal.

"I was also considering a new line of seed, it's a heartier version, that will yield stronger profits. We could —"

Lord Burbidge raised a hand. "We already have seed for this season, so that's something to discuss at a later time."

"But —"

"Enough, Oliver. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

The proverb, coming from Lord Burbidge, startled Oliver into silence. Was the phrase really that old?

"And while you might be willing to sink into the depths of boredom, I am not. I paid your wages today. The coin is in the top drawer. You seem a young man who needs coin in his pocket. Why not go and have some fun in the village?" Lord Burbidge abruptly stood. "I'm going riding."

Oliver literally had to bite his tongue to keep from lashing out at the man. As far as he could tell the guy never worked. A hedonist, his pleasure was all that seemed to drive him; chasing his employees around, drinking, getting excited about house parties!

The only thing the man was good at was hiring others to do his work.

If he couldn't motivate him, how was he supposed to get him out of there?

Oliver thought about Harry, about how he enjoyed going to pubs, drinking, having pointless conversations with others, much to the enjoyment of everyone around him.

It sparked an idea. "Actually, I was thinking I might go for a drink at the local pub. Are you interested?"

It would keep the man out of Alice's way, and keep him busy. Who knew what trouble he'd get into on his own?

Lord Burbidge, halfway across the room now, and obviously trying to get away from him, stopped. "You just don't seem the type that would enjoy such a thing. Come on, then."

He could figure out Lord Burbidge. He could figure out a plan that would incentivize the man.

He found his wages in the drawer, pocketed them, and followed behind, shooting daggers into the man's back.

And if he didn't? He could always gag and bind him on the night of the house party.

One thing was for sure, the man was not going to be anywhere

near Alice two days from now.



ALICE WAS CLEANING, and as usual, thinking about Oliver.

Everyone in the manor house was avoiding her. No doubt they didn't wish to be painted with the same disloyal brush.

That was fine.

It gave her time to think. Why wasn't she jumping at the chance to marry Oliver?

It was the perfect solution.

It would get her away from Lord Burbidge, and it would keep her safe.

Or would it?

She dusted the mantle, swirling the cloth around valuable knickknacks, while she thought.

She wasn't convinced that being with Oliver would necessarily keep her safe from Lord Burbidge. The man was married, after all, so marriage didn't seem to be a conflict for him.

Still, if she married Oliver, they could leave together.

Oliver was bright, and personable, look how easily he'd been hired by Lord Burbidge.

Surely, they could move on and find employment elsewhere?

It was the perfect solution.

Perhaps they could even send for her father after they were situated.

So why didn't she feel great about marrying him?

It wasn't that she didn't like Oliver, because she did. In fact, she found him incredibly attractive.

She stood on a ladder, and used the feather duster to clean the books on the top shelf before moving down, shelf by shelf in a well-practiced manner.

Her feelings for Oliver were ... she thought about it, and emotion rose within her. She did want to marry him.

It wasn't Oliver.

It was her lack of choices making her unhappy.

Perhaps this was simply a woman's lot in life? Was wanting a choice in her own life asking too much?

So yes, she did want to marry him. But she wanted him to want to marry her.

She didn't want him to simply want to save her.

So, she was saved, then what?

Then they were stuck together for the rest of their lives because he'd had a momentary whim, a heroic urge to marry her, to save her?

Her feminine pride was pricked. So no, she wasn't happy about the situation at all.

Was it too much to ask that he wanted to be with her?

Her chest twisted and twisted.

The housekeeper came in and checked her work. Mrs. Quinn glanced around the spotless room. "Are you about done?" she asked the question in an abrupt manner, quite unlike herself.

"Yes, just now."

Mrs. Quinn, her hair pulled up in a bun, her expression stern, gave a quick nod. "All right, girl, go into the kitchen and get something to eat."

With a feeling of dread, Alice headed toward the kitchen. She opened the door, and when she did, Cook, Fiona, and Ida all glanced up, and stopped speaking at the same time.

"Come on in, and get somefing to eat," Cook said, in a standoffish tone, completely unlike her boisterous self.

Alice felt like her skin was prickling, as the other girls sent her covert glances.

She sat down to eat, and Cook put a plate in front of her. She couldn't help but notice that Cook had given her less than her normal fare.

Cook set dessert in front of the other girls, a piece of pie with some thick cream on top, but there was not one set in front of Alice.

Her stomach tightened and she felt sick. Sick of this whole situation.

Everyone was angry at her because she'd told on Lord Burbidge?

She could feel her face heat, and anger rose within her that she even felt shame over the situation.

It was unfair that no one would take her side except for Oliver and her father. If she let herself be seduced, these women would condemn her as fallen. She couldn't win.

Without a word, Alice pushed away from the table, went out the back door, and as she made her way down the steps, was stopped by one of the twins.

"Don't you have any loyalty to our family? Where is your gratitude for what we have given you?"

Her heart sank. Jonathan.

She wanted to defend herself, but there was nothing to say, and she jerked her arm free and made her way to the garden, hot, angry tears, pouring down her face.

She found a bench to herself, grateful to find a place of refuge, if only for a moment.

Mayhap she should just accept Oliver's proposal, and be grateful for it, and hope for the best.

Her own mother had done that, hadn't she?

Admittedly, it had worked out. Her mother and father had loved each other deeply. And it hadn't started out that way, had it?

If her mother did have regrets, Alice had certainly never seen them. She'd certainly never spoken of the man who had fathered her child.

Alice hadn't even known such a man existed until, at age ten, she'd been informed by one of the maids.

Apparently, it had been gossiped about for years, but Alice had been sheltered from the fact that her father was not the man who fathered her.

She wondered if her mother's family would help her? If there was a way to get a message to them? As reckless as her mother had been, she knew her mother wanted her to avoid the same mistakes.

She felt like the walls were closing in on her, and she had no choice.

Well, she did have a choice. She could choose Oliver.

But to her surprise, she was unwilling to settle.

Her mother had wanted better for her. Her mother had wanted her to choose well, and for the right reasons.

If they had the time, she did believe that she would fall in love with Oliver, and he might come to love her in return.

She'd let him help her, as a friend, but she wasn't going to marry him unless she loved him, and he loved her in return.

She dried her face, checked her hair, and headed back into the manor house.

It was something to think about later, as for now, she needed to get back to work.



OLIVER COULD THINK of far more enjoyable things to do.

Hanging out with Lord Burbidge would not have been high on his to do list, ever, but, needs must, as his mother liked to say.

He would stick to the man like glue.

They went inside the pub. There was an excited outcry, and several men in the room lifted their glasses to Lord Burbidge and called out his name.

The man actually had friends? Oliver could see why he was interested in coming here. Apparently, he was well known, and something of a local celebrity.

The two of them bellied up to the bar, something Oliver would not have been comfortable with at one time, but his time with Harry had turned him into a regular, and it now seemed quite natural.



He missed his friend.

Harry drew people to him like flies to honey, and he'd made Oliver's life both easier, and more enjoyable, in the last few months.

"Barkeep, a glass of ale for me and my friend, if you will," Oliver said. The coin he slid across the bar was quickly snatched up, and two ales were promptly set in front of them.

Lord Burbidge raised his glass to Oliver in thanks, and took a deep drink.

Oliver, knowing what was expected of him, did the same. Another benefit from hanging out with Harry was that Oliver had more of a head for alcohol than he'd had in the past. Future. Whatever.

The ale was surprisingly good.

On to solving the dilemma. How to get Lord Burbidge to travel when the man wouldn't leave, as he didn't want to miss his own house party.

Oliver could simply kidnap the man on the night of the house party, douse him with laudanum, and tie him up in the cellar.

Wait, the cellar wouldn't work, as during a house party, food and alcohol would be flowing freely, some of which must surely be kept in the cellar.

Fine, he'd find a deserted shed to tie him up in for the evening.

He contemplated the logistics, and decided that perhaps it would simply be easier to stick to the man like glue for the entire evening. All he'd have to do was start talking about money, and their group would soon become the center of attention, and Lord Burbidge would be there, basking in the glow of his one trick pony.

He'd rather get him out of the way, but if a better solution didn't present itself, it might be the best plan.

He took another sip of ale. It was really good. When the barkeep walked in their direction, Oliver asked, "Who made this ale?"

The bartender, a big man with reddish blonde hair, grinned. "I made it from my grandmother's recipe."

"It is really good," Oliver said.

"I'm glad you like it," the man said, before moving on to help another customer.

When had they started bottling ale?

More to start a conversation with Lord Burbidge, then out of any real interest, he asked, "How do you keep your vegetables fresh in the wintertime?"

Lord Burbidge laughed. "The same as everyone else, I suppose. I store them in the cellar."

So, canning and bottling wasn't a thing yet. Which meant bottling beer was out.

"Why the interest?"

Oliver lifted his glass. "Because the ale is really good. If there was a way to bottle it, we could go into business with whoever made it and sell it around the country."

Lord Burbidge laughed. "You have some very good ideas, at times, Oliver. But at others, odd ones. Why would anyone buy beer from here when they already have their own beer throughout the entire country?"

"Superior taste. Superior marketing."

The barkeep came back in time to catch the end of their conversation. "I will take that as a compliment."

Oliver lifted a glass to him. "And so you should. I wish I had a way of sealing it into a glass bottle, and selling it throughout the country. You could make a fortune, as could your partner." He lifted his glass to Lord Burbidge. "If only there was a way to do it."

The barkeep shrugged his shoulders, and went to serve more beer to three men at another table, calling out for his attention.

Lord Burbidge nursed his drink.

When the barkeep came back, Oliver said, "At the very least, you will want to cook up some pretzels, make them nice and salty, and give them to your customers for free. The salty snacks will have your patrons drinking more."

He could see the other man weighing his words, before giving him a nod. "Thanks, I'll try that."

As the barkeep went off to serve more men calling for his attention, Lord Burbidge turned to Oliver. "You certainly think about business a lot, I'll give you that." He took a drink and then sighed. "Go ahead then. Tell me what you would have me do with Lord Anderson."

It was exactly the opening Oliver wanted. He didn't give Harry enough credit sometimes. Networking usually came easy for Oliver, because people came to him. When he had to work at it, there were nuances that escaped him.

Something to think about.

Oliver quickly cobbled together some ideas in his head. Coal, sheep, farming. They were all things that Lord Burbidge was already doing, and with a partner, they could both put up money, and turn any and all of their ventures into bigger business for bigger profit.

Lord Burbidge gave him a long look, and finally said, "I'm listening."

## Chapter 23

Alice went into the house through the front door so as to avoid the other servants.

She needed to try to take the high road, like her mother always had. Her mother had dealt with unkindness before she'd come to Rosewood, and Alice could do the same.

She'd done nothing wrong.

So, she'd keep her head up, work hard, and show by her actions that she deserved respect.

She went back upstairs to Lady Burbidge's room, and when she pushed open the door, it was to find Lady Burbidge and Fiona turning to stare at her. Lady Burbidge was having an early evening, as she was already in a nightgown, and Fiona was brushing her hair.

"Alice, where have you been?" Lady Burbidge asked.

"I'm sorry, my lady, I was working in the garden."

She moved to turn down the bed, and Lady Burbidge was quick to ask, "Are your hands clean?"

"Yes, of course, my lady."

"Good girl," Lady Burbidge said, and straightened once more so Fiona could brush her hair.

Was she a good girl? Alice couldn't help the bite of resentment that rose up with those words.

Everyone wanted something of her, wanted her to act in a certain way, to be a certain way, until Alice felt like she lost herself.

She carefully turned down the bed, and smoothed the sheet over the bed spread.

Fiona settled Lady Burbidge in a chair, and Alice was quick to get a blanket for her lap.

Lady Burbidge read for a while, and while she did Alice dusted and polished the vanity, polishing perfume bottles, her pots of makeup, and organizing her brushes.

When Lady Burbidge announced she'd like to do some stitching, Alice gathered her things and set up her loom, lifting different colors of string for Lady Burbidge to choose from.

She was soon embroidering. "Would you like to help?"

Alice felt like this was a test of some kind, and was quick to say, “Yes, thank you.”

Alice threaded her needle, and following Lady Burbidge’s instruction, used the white thread to create a daisy.

Lady Burbidge checked her work until she was satisfied that Alice knew what she was doing. “Your mother taught you?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“You seem very proficient.”

“I still do it in my father’s house. I’ve decorated the curtains, pillowcases and such.”

“Perhaps I will let you try your hand at a pillowcase for me.”

“I’d be honored, my lady.”

After a nod, they both resumed their work.

Lady Burbidge instructed Fiona to get some tea, and Alice was relieved that she wouldn’t have to face everyone in the kitchen again.

By the time Lady Burbidge was ready to go to bed, Alice helped get her situated, and banked the fire.

“Thank you, Alice. You’re excused.”

Alice gave Lady Burbidge a quick curtsy, and headed out the door.

She’d stayed in Lady Burbidge’s room long enough that there was no one about when she went down the stairs. She made a quick decision and headed for the front door, and let herself out, quickly shutting the door behind her again.

It was dark now, and as she rounded the manor house she made her way to the back, and then, ducking through the garden, she walked through it until she could walk out the opposite side.

When she saw the candle in the window of her father’s cottage, she felt nothing but relief.

It had been a long day, and she was glad it was over.



WITH THEIR ARMS around each other, Oliver and Lord Burbidge staggered out of the pub.

The man was drunk, but affable with it, and Oliver might have been a little buzzed himself as everything Lord Burbidge did, or said, seemed to be very funny.

Giggling like loons, Oliver tried unsuccessfully to get Lord Burbidge up on his horse, but when the man ended up in a heap at his feet, they’d decided to walk their mounts back to the property.

As they staggered along, Lord Burbidge pet his horse’s nose, and gave her the kind of praise that any woman might respond to. Well, if she was a baby, anyway, which at two years old, the horse certainly was.

She nodded her head at him with each bit of praise, and even rubbed her face into his once or twice.

Oliver supposed that even villains had soft spots, though it surprised him. He'd have expected Lord Burbidge to be cruel to animals, and have all sorts of other vices as well. He supposed no one was all bad.

Dapple, ever faithful, followed behind, wagging his tail whenever Oliver looked in his direction.

Lord Burbidge glanced back to see what Oliver was looking at, and then dropped to his knees to give Dapple a pat on the head and then rubbed behind his ears. More baby talk ensued, and Dapple didn't seem to mind in the least, and in fact, writhed in ecstasy.

After ranting about a neighbor for a good part of the way, and praising the horse and dog occasionally, and even heaping praise upon Oliver himself, they eventually made their way to the stables.

When Oliver opened the door, Gilbert came out, yawning and stretching, and helped them remove the saddles.

They left the boy to rub down the horses and when Lord Burbidge ran into the door on his way out, Oliver started to laugh, and after a stunned moment of silence, Lord Burbidge joined in.

The two of them, arms around each other once more, headed for the manor.

Oliver was starting to have doubts about the man. Could he really hurt Alice? Kill her? He was a bit of a narcissist, but would he really go that far?

Reardon on the other hand, was a different story. He could not imagine the man killing Alice because she refused to be seduced by his boss. But what about to get back at Oliver?

He had a cruel, vicious streak, and that made Oliver uneasy.

So, perhaps?

Or, could this be some sort of weird time loop where Alice was murdered because Oliver showed up? The thought of it sent a chill up his spine.

Oliver moved a giggling Lord Burbidge up the stairs and to his bedroom where the man's valet took over. Lord Burbidge waved and grinned and called out, "Goodbye! Goodbye, Oliver!"

Oliver waved and went back downstairs.

How he wished that would be the last he saw of the man, and that he could collect Alice and be on his way.

He was about to leave the house when he decided he wasn't tired after all, and went into the office instead. He took the single lit candle, lit two others, and pulled out three pieces of paper.

At the top of each he wrote one word. Coal. Farming. Sheep.

He'd draw up those business proposals they'd talked about, and the

sooner he could get Lord Burbidge and others interested in expansion, and direct the man's attention elsewhere, the better.

As it was the only thing he could think to do at the moment, he'd best get started.

## Chapter 24

The next morning, Oliver tapped on the Munro's front door.

Alice was quick to answer, and when her face lit, just for a moment, it loosened something within him, and triggered a weird combination of satisfaction and happiness.

"Good morrow to you," Alice opened the door wide.

"Good morning."

"Have you broken your fast?"

"No, I've not had any breakfast yet."

"Come in, and I'll feed you."

When Oliver ducked inside, Mr. Munro was already seated at the table. "Oh, ho! Look who it is? And what are you doing about on such a fine morning?"

"Oh, you know, I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by."

Mr. Munro threw back his head and laughed like that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

Alice, still smiling, quickly set another place, and served all three of them porridge and eggs before taking a seat.

Alice quickly blessed the food, and the three of them started in.

"This is really good," Oliver said.

Alice glanced down at her meal, her face turning slightly pink. "Thank you, it is just porridge and eggs, a simple meal."

"Simple for you, perhaps, but I haven't cooked anything since university, and even then, very rarely. We only had a hot plate for making quick snacks, but usually we just went to the cafeteria."

Both of them stared at him. Finally, Mr. Munro said, "You were schooled at a university?"

Oliver gave a slight shrug, as he quickly realized that it wasn't commonplace in this day and age, and so it set him a little further apart from this little family. Something he didn't want in the least. "I did."

Alice was looking down at her plate, and within a few moments he realized she wasn't meeting his gaze anymore.

He grasped about, trying to think of a way to set them both at

ease.

But his mind was now a blank, and he took another bite of food as the silence became even more awkward.

Mr. Munro glanced between the two of them and gave a slight chuckle. "I'm going to be planting wildflowers on the edge of the East lawn today," he looked at Oliver. "The bluebells and foxgloves are some of Alice's favorites. They won't be much to look at for a few weeks or so, but when they start to bloom, they'll be stunning."

As they finished breakfast Mr. Munro continued to talk about gardening.

Alice sent him an occasional glance, as Oliver answered all of Mr. Munro's inquiries.

When Mr. Munro had finished his breakfast, he pushed back from the table and stood. "Thank you, Alice. That was delicious as always."

He looked at Oliver. "She takes after her mother, you know. She was also beautiful, a talented cook, and a fine homemaker."

"Father!" Alice sounded mortified.

Mr. Munro only chuckled. "I'm going to get to work. If you could help Alice with cleanup before the two of you leave for the day, I'd consider it a boon."

"Yes, sir," Oliver said as he bit back a smile.

"Good, good." Mr. Munro donned his hat and then opened the door before either Alice or Oliver had spoken another word.

After a short silence, Oliver said "Alice —"

"Oliver —"

They both laughed self-consciously.

"You go first," Oliver said.

For a moment, she looked like she might protest, but then said, "All right, I wanted to talk to you about your proposal of marriage."

A sliver of hurt pinched him and he was quick to say, "Don't worry, you don't have to marry me. Regardless, I'll still help you. I have a plan."

He opened his mouth to tell her what he planned, but she held up her hand.

"I want to marry for the right reasons."

Oliver swallowed. "As do I." Was she saying ... he wasn't sure what she was saying. But he did know that he didn't want her marrying him because he was the only possibility that looked good to her. "Alice, as I told you, I have a friend coming to get us tomorrow night. I know it doesn't feel like you have a lot of options right now, but I promise you, you're going to have more than you could imagine. I'll make sure of it."

She looked at him solemnly, and he suddenly wished he'd kept his mouth shut, and listened to what she had to say.



Perhaps he wasn't as selfless as he'd thought. Perhaps he didn't want her to have a lot of options beyond him.

He was falling in love with her. He'd been half in love when he'd arrived, but now that he knew her, he was very much a goner. She was sweet, hard-working, kind, interested in the world around her. And, yes, just like everyone else, he loved how she looked.

Did that make him a bad person?

Perhaps not bad, but perhaps no better than the men around him?

It didn't leave him feeling great about himself.

Still, he really would do anything for her, and even if he wanted to, he refused to take advantage of the situation.

He would save her life if it was the last thing he ever did.

And if she wanted to date him when they were back in his time, he'd be grateful for whatever she was willing to give.

An ache filtered its way through his chest.

In the here and now, if she fell in love with him, he would know it was for himself, and not for his money.

He suspected that was why he'd wanted Daphne. Daphne wouldn't have married him for his money, and she'd proven that all too well, hadn't she? She hadn't wanted him at all.

Perhaps Alice didn't either.

The house party was tomorrow, and each day had been busier than the one before. There was an air of general excitement in the house, and Oliver even felt it himself.

"Alice, I'm going to need one thing from you. During the house party, you are to stay inside the manor house. You're not to leave, do you understand?"

"Where do you think I would go? Of course, I will be in the manor house. I will be in charge of helping Lady Burbidge get ready for the evening, and then I am to stand behind the table and serve the wine."

"I'm glad to hear it," Oliver said. "I just wanted to make sure that we were on the same page. I have your word?"

"You do. I will not leave the manor house."

All right. That was a good start.

He would draw Lord Burbidge's attention away from Alice, keep all the men excited about money making ventures, and keep Alice safe.

"Oliver?"

He realized he had drifted away in his thoughts and gave Alice a smile. "Come on, let's get to work."

When they were both out the door and walking toward the manor Oliver said, "I don't want you to worry about anything. I have this handled."

"Handled?"

“Yes, I’m going to take care of everything, including you. I don’t want you to worry anymore.”

When they reached the back steps leading to the kitchen, Alice stopped and turned, her hands clasped in front of her. “Oliver, I’m not sure what it is you’re planning to do, but I can see that you believe in it, and so I intend to as well.”

Oliver’s breath caught. She didn’t understand what he was talking about because he was ranting like a lunatic and she didn’t know what he meant, but she was telling him that she did believe in him.

Sudden warmth coursed through his veins. “I won’t let you down.”

She was still solemn when she said, “I know you won’t.”

As he watched her walk up the steps and into the kitchen, he realized his heart was tripping in his chest.

“No,” he said aloud. “I will not let you down.”



ALICE HAD SPENT the last two days running around like the proverbial chicken with its head cut off.

As with all parties there had been a real sense of excitement building throughout the day.

Cleaning, polishing, pressing, cooking, gardening; as far as Alice could tell, there was not one person on the estate who’d not been affected by the upcoming house party.

And now, here it was.

Guests were arriving and Lord and Lady Burbidge were welcoming them in the hall.

The library, drawing room, dining room, and study were all open, with guests spilling out of each room, talking, laughing, flirting, and generally having a good time.

Lady Burbidge, who generally kept a sharp eye on the wine cellar, had opened the doors for the house party.

No expense was to be spared, and if the guests didn’t walk away impressed, it was not for lack of trying.

Alice stood off to one side, fresh drinks in front of her, and a bottle ready to refill any glass proffered.

It wasn’t the first house party she’d attended, but for some reason everything seemed bolder, and brighter, from the gowns and jewels worn by the ladies, to the flowers arranged throughout the room.

She took pride in the fact that she’d helped Lady Burbidge outshine many of the women present. She wore a high waisted red gown made of frothy material, the layers falling straight down, and Lady Burbidge’s powdered hair was curled around her head with strategically placed pearls throughout.

Lady Burbidge, ever the gracious hostess, was in a good mood tonight.

Alice was glad to be in charge of serving drinks, as Cook was barking out commands in the kitchen like a general laying siege. Everything had to be perfect, and if it wasn't, Cook wanted to know why.

It also gave her the opportunity to observe everyone. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to be one of the aristocracy.

As it was early summer, and with the gloom of a long winter, and wet spring behind them, the house party was well attended, though many of the aristocracy would head to London soon. Lord and Lady Norrington looked to be having a good time, laughing with their peers, longtime friends their own age.

George approached with an empty tray and a smile, and she quickly helped him refill it and then he was off again serving drinks, and then collecting empty glasses and taking them to the kitchen, before coming back out with clean glasses, to do it all over again.

It looked like Lady Pamela had caught the eye of a young gentleman and was having a good time, laughing, chatting and as happy as Alice had ever seen her.

Her brothers were nowhere to be seen, but they were probably outside flirting with girls.

Her gaze once again landed upon Oliver. He was facing her, and was wearing the suit she'd seen him in that first day, and that alone would have made him stand out. The way the men, powerful and rich, were hanging upon his every word, their group was growing by the minute as he seemed to attract every man in the vicinity.

Lord Burbidge stood beside him looking as if his buttons would burst.

And Alice, feeling slightly breathless, couldn't quite believe that such an intelligent, thoughtful, and gentle man had asked her to marry him.

She wondered if in future she herself would ever be in a gathering such as this, as one of the participants, rather than a servant.

If she married Oliver, she thought it would be a distinct possibility.

The thought of it ought to fill her with fear, but it didn't. It filled her with an odd sort of pride to think that such a high caliber man was interested in her.

She continued to pour drinks for the next hour, and the crowd seemed to loosen up and become slightly more raucous with every passing moment.

Music started up in the library, and from her position in the study, Alice could see couples lining up to dance, the men and women coming together, then apart, to the simple music of a piano and violin.

She was surprised by the yearning that welled up within her.

Though she often didn't feel it, she was a young girl herself, after all, so why wouldn't she want the same things that other girls did?

The next moment, Oliver was standing beside her. Smiling, he followed her gaze to where the dancers were stepping and jumping their way through a country dance.

"Ms. Munro, might I have this dance?"

Her smile turned into a laugh, and a tiny flickering of emotion rose up and filled her with happiness. She pinched her dress and gave him a curtsy. "Why, yes, sir. I would love to dance."

He held out a hand. "Come with me."

A thrill raced through her, but she did not reach for his hand. "And where will we go? Into the middle of the dancers? They might question the presence of a servant in their midst."

He grinned at her. "Oh, I think not. I believe they are all perfectly soused and won't notice much of anything."

She glanced around and chuckled. "You may be right."

"I know I am. As do you, as you've been the one pouring the wine all evening."

She laughed again. "So I have, and cannot deny it."

"Will you dance with me?"

"I'm afraid that I will not."

Oliver put a hand to his heart like he'd been injured there, making Alice laugh once again.

"Well, if you won't dance with me, perhaps you'll agree to marry me, instead?"

"Your romantic proposal is leaving me breathless," she said.

"Come now, don't be like that. This is the third time I've proposed to you."

"Then shouldn't your proposals be getting better?"

Oliver's gaze fastened on hers, and he took her hand in his. "Alice, beautiful girl, and love of my life, I have come a far distance to find you and to make you mine. Would you please do me the honor of becoming my wife, because if you do, you'll make my life complete."

She didn't know if he was teasing or if he wasn't, but either way, her heartbeats tumbled and she found herself truly breathless now, drawing in air.

Her fingers clenched on his, and whatever he saw in her face had him lifting her hand and kissing the back of it, the warmth of that light touch affecting her even more.

"I must say, that was much, much better."

"And your answer?" he looked so earnest now.

As she looked at him, she realized that he was holding his breath, as if her response truly did mean the world to him. That strong wall,

the fortress she'd built around her heart seemed to crumble and fall in an instant, leaving her feeling exposed.

She swallowed and drew in a swift breath.

"Oliver, come over here, will you?"

They both glanced up to see Lord Burbidge waving Oliver over, and Alice was very happy to see he didn't look upset to have caught Oliver talking to her.

Oliver's lips curled into a smile, his brown eyes grew lively, and he whispered, "I will dance with you, just see if I don't," and then he left.

Something inside her, the worry and fear that she'd carried for so long, seemed to dissipate, and amusement tugged at her lips.

Perhaps she really could have a future with Oliver, after all.

Perhaps they, just like any other boy and girl, could take their time and fall in love.

Thoughts of her mother rose up within her. Her mother had wanted that for her. To have a husband and a family without any of the ugliness that had shadowed her own life before she married.

She knew her mother had felt Alice had lost out by not knowing her extended family. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins. Her mother had had all of that growing up, and Alice none of it.

She knew the loss of her mother's family had left an emptiness in its place.

A sadness that she'd never quite gotten over.

And yes, that emptiness was also felt by Alice. If her father died, she'd have no one.

The fun and excitement she'd felt earlier drained away.

Did she want to accept Oliver's proposal for safety, security, family?

She didn't think so, but she still wished things could be different. She wished she had other options, so she was choosing him because they loved each other, and had the time to explore that, get to know each other, and have a choice.

She wanted him to choose her for reasons other than that he found her pretty, and he felt he needed to save her.

And she wanted to choose him because she was in love with an intelligent, wonderful man. Which he was.

She blinked, feeling suddenly disoriented as a feeling of yearning blossomed in her. Who was she fooling? She'd simply never felt this way about anyone before, because she hadn't met Oliver yet. She did love him. She loved his strength, his intensity, his humor. She was so busy keeping every male at bay, that's she'd forgotten to pay attention, to be informed by her heart.

That heart of hers twisted, and her breath shallowed.

She loved him. Her feelings for him had grown so fast, that she

tested the words again. She loved Oliver. She was struck with an odd feeling of fear and euphoria. She didn't want to love someone who would end up hurting her. But ...

"Alice?"

She glanced up to see one of the twins.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I did not see you standing there. Would you like something to drink?"

He shook his head. "No, thank you. I'm just the messenger. Oliver has asked me to tell you to meet him in the garden." He gave her such a sweet smile that she knew it was Jeremy. It called to mind how he looked as a young boy, when she used to help take care of him with his nanny.

This seemed to be the evening of miracles, and mayhap even of fresh starts, as his demeanor was happy and easy.

She felt a sliver of hope. Was everyone going to move past what had happened?

She could see how going to the priest could have shocked and angered everyone, but if they were willing to move past it, so was she.

"The garden?" Jeremy reminded.

A feeling of yearning swept over her.

Oliver had asked her to stay inside, but after asking her to dance, and telling her that he would see it done, she suspected he was going to ensure that she did get that dance.

With newfound feelings sweeping through her, she waved a hand at Fiona and when the other girl came over, Alice asked if she would take her place for a few minutes.

"All right, but hurry back. Cook has calmed down, but we don't want to set her off again, do we?"

Alice gave the other girl a smile, and then accompanied Jeremy through the terrace doors and toward the garden she'd known and loved her entire life.

Perhaps she needed to let go of all her worries and insecurities and simply feel the tide of excitement and happiness that swept through her, even now.

Perhaps she just needed to accept that what she felt for Oliver may have started out with him wanting to save her, but perhaps she could save him in return?

They could build a family, and have children who would have a grandmother and holidays with those cousins he'd spoken of.

She would be a good wife to him, and he would never have cause to regret his choice.

She untied her apron and held it in one hand.

She was going to dance with him, and it would be as his equal.

She needed to stop worrying so much, and realize that a man who

would arrange for a servant to dance in the garden was one worth keeping.

She was starting to think that she just might be the girl to keep him.

“*K*irby, it’s good to see you again.”

Kirby Wilmot looked around and grinned when he saw Oliver. “It looks to me like you have made a name for yourself in a very short time. My father is quite taken with you. He was impressed that I knew you, and had done you a good turn.”

Kirby sent Oliver a meaningful look. “I was hoping that you would include him in some of your ideas, because we are such good friends.”

“I don’t know, Kirby. Friends don’t charge friends for traveling such a short distance.” Oliver looked pointedly at the ring gracing Kirby’s finger. One that Oliver had not wanted to lose.

Kirby laughed, took off the ring and handed it to Oliver. “Just make sure when you’re talking to my father you mention my name frequently and often.”

Oliver slipped the ring back on his finger where it belonged. “Will do.”

Oliver was happy with the way the evening was going. Lord Burbidge had mentioned to his neighbors the plans Oliver had put together. The man might be on the fence about Oliver’s plans, but his neighbors were not.

The anticipation in the crowd had grown, and even men who were not in a position to be involved with the expansion of their operations, wanted Oliver’s advice on other things, and added quite a bit to the ongoing conversation.

There was excitement in the air.

Lord Burbidge was basking in the glow of their combined admiration as if he himself was a genius simply for finding Oliver.

It seemed that any harsh feelings that he harbored toward Oliver bringing his reprehensible deeds to light had melted away.

Even to the point that when he’d caught the two of them together earlier, he had not seemed to care in the least.

Degenerate creep.

Still, all in all, it looks like there would be no need for Oliver and Alice to try and sneak away this evening.

They could simply go outside and meet Wickham at the



appropriate time, without worry.

Whatever danger Alice had been in when Oliver had arrived was now diffused.

It was both a relief, and a high.

The same type of high he felt when coming up with ideas, and especially when executing them.

He'd come to save the girl, and he'd done exactly that. And if he had to enrich the man who'd originally murdered Alice to keep him compliant, well, sometimes such was the price of a win.

He spent his time answering questions, and was happy to do it, glancing into the study occasionally to catch Alice's gaze when he was able.

Only the next time he passed the study, she wasn't there.

With only a slight bit of trepidation, he excused himself and headed over to Fiona. "Where's Alice?"

Fiona's eyes widened in surprise. "Why, she went to meet you in the garden."

"What?" Oliver said loudly, and several of the nearby guests turned in their direction. "What do you mean she's in the garden?"

"She was going to dance with you, but you're here and ..."

"Who told her that? Who came to get her?"

Oliver was already moving out the door.



EXCITEMENT SWIRLED through Alice as she followed Jeremy into the garden.

She and Oliver would only have time for a quick dance, but she appreciated the romance of the gesture and decided that a man who would set this up for a girl was one worth keeping.

She followed Jeremy down the path until they rounded into the center of the garden, and she was very happy to realize they could still hear the music if only from a distance.

She glanced around for Oliver even as she said, "Thank you, Jeremy, for coming to get me."

"Oh, you're very welcome," he said, only the sweet tone he'd used on her earlier was gone, and he sounded menacing.

Just then, another man stepped out of the shadows, and it wasn't Oliver.

Her body felt like it hollowed out, and was suddenly replaced with pure fear.

Her heart started to pound and she turned and ran in the other direction, but was quickly captured.

Her body froze up, all tension and harsh angles and she feared to

look, but was unable to do otherwise.

The man who'd captured her was Jonathan, and he was stronger than she would have believed possible. Though they were in the shadows, she could clearly see the ugly, cruel look upon his face.

She drew in a breath to scream, but was twirled around and a hand was placed over her mouth.

Panic had her by the throat, and her heart was pumping so hard she almost couldn't hear the words that rumbled in her ear. "Hello, Alice. Are you glad to see me?"

She struggled and grunted and met Jeremy's gaze. He looked slightly sick. Wide-eyed, she tried to beg him with her gaze, even as she knew it was pointless. He'd never go against Jonathan.

She tried to choke back the tears welling in her eyes, even as she screamed for Oliver, the sound muffled.

Dapple came out of nowhere and snarled, barked and bit at Jeremy's leg.

Jeremy kicked the dog, and it yelped and flew into a bush.

She could hear party goers over the hedge of roses, so close, but hidden from view and she prayed they heard the commotion.

Jonathan held her tightly and laughed. "Come on. We need to talk. Let's go find some privacy, shall we?"

Cold fear weighed her down and her mind screamed at her to fight. As he walked her forward, she struggled against his hold, unable to believe that this was happening.

She'd known these boys their entire lives.

Surely they wouldn't harm her?



OLIVER HEADED out to the garden to find Alice.

He was trying not to panic. He'd diffused the situation with Lord Burbidge, and in fact, had seen the man as he'd been leaving the building.

There was nothing to worry about.

He tried not to think about the doubts he'd had earlier. That someone else had murdered Alice.

Reardon was a bully, no doubt, and while Oliver could see him murdering someone if he could get away with it, he couldn't see him risking a noose around his neck when he couldn't.

And anyway, he'd just seen Reardon as well. Both of his suspects were present and accounted for. There was no need to worry.

And, she was with the twins.

They weren't going to harm anyone. Most likely, Jeremy had lured her out into the garden to actually dance with her.

Those boys needed to be taken in hand, that was for certain, but they weren't murderers.

Still, he was all but sprinting now, and when he ran into Mr. Munro, he stopped and asked, "Have you seen Alice?"

"No." Mr. Munro looked alarmed.

"Check your house," Oliver said with urgency. He'd rather err on the side of caution.

Without a word Mr. Munro took off to do exactly that. And it didn't take Oliver long to reach the garden and go inside. "Alice!"

He ran one direction and took a look, and then back the way he'd come and around the corner to the center of the garden only to find there was no one there.

He ran through the entire garden once again, though he knew he couldn't have missed her. "Alice!" he called out again.

He could hear the laughter of some of the guests out on the lawn and he exited the garden and started to walk around the entire thing, looking every which way for Alice.

Young girls in white dresses laughed with gentlemen of various ages.

Croquet had been set up on one end of the lawn, and though the sun had started to go down, torches had been lit, and no one looked like they were in a hurry to go inside.

He continued his walk around the garden, coming to the area where Alice grew her medicinal plants, all lined up in a row and growing nicely.

And still, Alice was nowhere to be seen.

He considered running back to the house to see if she'd returned, but decided if she had, she was safe, and there was no harm in continuing to look for her outside.

He heard Dapple barking and glanced around to see him snarling at the stable doors, his little legs pounding on the earth in front of the door, his body primed for an attack.

Oliver didn't think, he ran as panic grabbed him by the throat and squeezed. He threw open the stable doors, went inside and came to a stop.

The dimming light showed Alice, her dress torn at the collar, and tugged up to her hips, struggling on the ground, while one twin straddled her, strangled her, and the other looked on.

Disbelief, then rage unlike anything he'd ever felt boiled up within him and, with a yell he charged forward, but before he was able to reach Jonathan, for he had no doubt it was him, a hoe slammed into the boy's face and sent a spray of blood into the air to land against a stable wall, his body twisting to fall to one side.

Jonathan screamed.

Alice screamed.

Dapple rushed over and bit Jonathan, growling and tugging at his ankle as the young man fought him off.

The horse within made sounds of distress and jumped, its hooves kicking the side of the wood.

Mr. Munro, that gentle man, his face red with rage, swung the hoe again, this time hitting Jeremy in the back.

Jeremy grunted, and then ran for the open door as Oliver rushed to Alice, who was choking, crawling away, and moaning at the same time.

But by God, she was breathing.

“Alice. Alice, please let me help you.”

“My face! What have you done to my face!” Jonathan, his hand pressed to his bloodied face, cursed the lot of them, threw out threats, and fought off the dog who was growling off to one side now, darting in to nip at his legs.

Oliver literally wanted to kill him.

If he did, he’d be protecting Alice, and making Jonathan pay, and as much as he wanted to do it, he contented himself with sneering. “I guess I’ll be able to tell you apart now, won’t I?”

Jonathan scrambled to his feet and ran after his brother, the dog chasing him as far as the exit before stopping, snorting, and contenting himself with growling at the retreating figure.

This was bad.

When Burbidge saw his heirs face, he wasn’t going to care about what he was doing to Alice.

They had at least two more hours until Wickham showed up.

When Jonathan’s injury was discovered, Lord Burbidge was not going to care that Alice had been attacked.

No, Oliver had had plenty of time to discover that Lord Burbidge’s word was law around here.

He couldn’t risk Alice.

They just had to wait until Wickham got there, hopefully at ten o’clock. Just two more hours.

With Alice tucked under his arm, they walked the long way around the garden to get to Munro’s cottage so they wouldn’t be seen.

They hurried inside, Alice changed her dress, and they gathered the possessions that they’d had ready and waiting.

They could hide nearby until Wickham got there.

“Hush, dearest,” Oliver said, when Alice continued to cry. “Hush, now. You’re all right. We’ll get out of here tonight, and be on our way, and you’ll never have to see this place or these people ever again.”

Oliver quickly gathered up their one and only carpet bag, and one of the blankets that they’d tied things inside.

They could wait in the field behind the cottage, and make their way to the garden to meet Wickham when he arrived.

He was still holding onto Alice as he barked out orders to Mr. Munro. "Grab the pack, grab that one blanket, and then follow me. I'll get you settled, and then I'll come back for the rest when things have calmed down."

Mr. Munro didn't hesitate, and did exactly as Oliver said, and Oliver led Alice toward the door. She was starting to calm down, and pulled to a stop. "Oliver, I have to tell you that I realized —"

"Hush now, we need to go."

"I need you to know that I love you. I do. So much. I should have realized sooner, should have —"

"Alice." His mouth dropped and he stilled, pulling her to a stop. His hands gripped her waist, pulling her closer, and he shook his head and started her forward again. "Come on," he said, and led her out the door just as Lord Burbidge, Reardon, and two footmen, strode forward to confront them.

“*M*y son’s face! My heir!” Lord Burbidge was so angry his face was white and he sputtered.

Oliver’s heart sank in his chest. But he didn’t hesitate to go on the offense. “Your son has attacked Alice, and I barely stopped him from murdering her. He was strangling the life out of her when I caught him.”

“You are just full of lies, aren’t you? First about me, and now about my son. I think you’re obsessed with this girl, and you think everyone is out to get her. And now my son’s face!” His voice rose with rage. “*Is ruined!* My son and heir is damaged for life!”

Lord Burbidge, seething with rage, choked the words out in anger. He gestured toward their possessions, now dropped on the ground, and sneered, “The innocent, do not run away!”

“You do if you know that the Lord of the manor is a tyrant! You brought this on yourself, you know,” Oliver said. “If the father acts like a libertine, then the sons learn that behavior as well.”

Burbidge’s face slackened, just a fraction, and Oliver saw that his point had hit home. Truth always did.

“Be glad that you still have him. Your son would have been a murderer this night, destined to hang, if I hadn’t stopped him!”

“Liar!” Lord Burbidge gestured toward Reardon and some of the footmen. “Take them all, I want them locked up in the dungeon.”

Reardon reached for Oliver, the two of them grappled and Oliver hit him in the face, splitting his lip.

Dapple went crazy and started barking, biting at the man’s boots.

Reardon took several steps back, barely keeping his balance, and then reached a hand up to feel his mouth, and looked at the blood staining his fingers. A look of pure rage flared in the other man’s face. When Alice rushed forward to pick up Dapple, Oliver was quick to grab her and pull her behind him.

Oliver, surged forward to meet Reardon’s attack, taking a solid punch to the gut, and giving one in return.

“Stop,” Lord Burbidge said, and at Alice’s cry, Oliver moved away from Reardon to see that Lord Burbidge held a knife to Alice’s throat.

She was pale as death, but her neck was red and mottled.

"Alice ..." The fight went out of him, replaced by cold fear.

Reardon grasped Oliver's arm, pulling it behind his back, then muscled him forward, and Oliver started to protest in earnest. "You have no right to do this! I saved a young lady from rape and murder! If it was anyone but your son, then this would be a very different conversation!"

Lord Burbidge took a step until he was in front of Alice. "You, my dear, have become more trouble than you're worth."

"Don't you talk to her. Don't you dare speak to her. And especially don't you touch her!"

"Take them away," Lord Burbidge said. "Around back and through the cellar doors. I don't want any witnesses."

Oliver, being shoved forward by Reardon, craned his neck to see the footmen leading Alice and her father to follow after them.

How were they supposed to get out of this?



#### THEY HAD SEPARATED THEM.

Oliver had fought, and it took three of them to tie his hands in front of him, and then with two of them holding him down, Reardon tied his legs together.

They hauled him up, sat him down on a chair, and when he bounded back up, Reardon wrapped an arm around him and said, "I'm going to sit you in this chair once more. If you don't stay, I am willing to leave you on the ground and use you as a kickin' post."

When Reardon lowered him into the chair, this time, Oliver stayed.

He needed to keep his wits about him, and his body healthy, if he wanted to rescue Alice.

He tried to tamp down the panic that kept rising within him. "Where's Alice?"

This was the night that she'd disappeared, the night she'd been murdered, and he'd thought, he'd hoped, that between them, he and Mr. Munro had stopped it.

Now, he wasn't sure of anything.

Lord Burbidge was angry, Jonathan was a vindictive and vicious little criminal, and they both wanted to blame her for everything.

Who wasn't to say they were harming her, even now?

Panic clawed within him once again, insisting he do something.

Reardon paced in front of Oliver, his fists clenching and unclenching.

Goading his opponent was as ingrained in Harry as breathing, and he'd taught Oliver how to use that weapon like a knife.

“It looks to me like you are in need of a good fight,” Oliver said, with just the right touch of a supercilious sneer in his voice.

Harry would be proud.

“Untie me, and I’ll be glad to accommodate you.”

Reardon stopped and stared at Oliver. “We’ll just see how much fight you ’ave left in you when this night is through.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Reardon leaned down until he was in Oliver’s face. “Lord Burbidge’s son is scarred for life. Do you ’onestly believe the man isn’t going to want some revenge? And while you and I both know Munro was the one who ’it the boy, I don’t believe Burbidge will get as much enjoyment out of damaging ’im, as ’e will you.”

Recklessness and a strange kind of detachment had Oliver laughing in Reardon’s face. “I don’t think Burbidge’s neighbors are going to be happy if I am too damaged to make them any money. And they are all planning to make a pile of money off my ideas.”

Reardon’s face clenched. “Mayhap, or mayhap not. Things done in the ’eat of anger are no’ always sensible.”

Oliver stared him down. “Well then, as there won’t be much of me later, I think that it is the perfect time to have that fight, man to man. I’m probably the only one in existence that has knocked you out flat. You gotta wonder if you could actually take me.”

Reardon bunched his fists once again, but Oliver lifted his hands high and said, “This is how you want to remember yourself? Too scared to take me on? Think about how that’s going to eat into that tiny little brain of yours.”

Reardon grabbed hold of Oliver’s hands, and quickly untied him. “You can get your legs your own self,” he said, when Oliver’s hands were free.

Reardon turned and paced away, shaking his own hands out, fists clenching and unclenching as he readied for a fight.

Something hardened within Oliver, and the moment he freed himself, he rushed the bigger man, knowing if he didn’t win, that they would lose everything this night.



ALICE and her father were locked into a room in the cellar.

Her father had his arm tightly wrapped around her, and she could hear his heart beating in his chest.

Dapple whined at her feet.

This was so bad.

Her throat hurt, and she was still in a state of disbelief.

She’d almost died.



She lifted her hand to her throat and tried to fight the panic overwhelming her.

She hadn't been able to breathe, and continued to suck in air, as if her body now couldn't get enough of it.

Oliver had told her not to leave the manor house. He'd impressed it upon her repeatedly, as if he'd known something bad would happen if she did, and she had thoughtlessly gone against his wishes.

She'd been so easily tricked.

In not listening to him, she'd brought this down upon all of them.

"What are we going to do?" she asked her father, and her voice came out rough, raspy, surprising her.

After a long moment, he said, "I don't know. I will tell you this, I will die before I let them hurt you again."

Alice burst into tears. She was so angry at herself, angry at Lord Burbidge, at his sons, and that she was in this situation.

The priest had said that she had been born in sin.

Perhaps she had been.

Her blood turned to lead, her body to stone.

Perhaps she really had been born with a stained soul or something that marked her for suffering.

Feeling utterly hopeless, she sobbed out a fervent prayer, beseeching God's grace, hoping to be heard.

Harry had once told Oliver, about a friend of his, a man by the name of Sweeney. He was shorter than Harry, his muscles less bulky, and he always had a ready smile and a sly sense of humor.

Harry had told Oliver that he'd rather fight a polecat than get into it with Sweeney, because the man was vicious, had a will of iron, and would never concede a fight.

And he'd never lost one, until he'd lost his life on Culloden Moor.

At the time, Harry had been trying to impress upon Oliver that it wasn't the size of the man that determined the winner in a fight. It was a matter of skill, and will.

Months of daily training with Harry had given him the skill, and his will hardened to Sweeney-like proportions as he slammed his fist repeatedly into the other man's side.

This was truly life or death.

Reardon took hold of Oliver, and there was no doubt he had more natural strength, but Oliver continued to punch him in the side, a kidney punch, drilling for the other man's spine the way that Harry had taught him.

Reardon slugged him on the side of his face, but Oliver leaned back, and his fist glanced off without much power, and in the heat of the moment, Oliver barely felt it.

Intent on causing as much pain as possible, as fast as possible, Oliver smashed his left fist into the taller man's face, and then his right, two quick punches that clipped his jaw and had the man reeling backward.

Reardon hit him in the throat, and Oliver let the pain of it wash over him, and, as he choked, Reardon tried to kick Oliver in the crotch, but Oliver lifted his leg and blocked him, then stomped his foot hard atop Reardon's, causing the other man to yell in pain.

If Reardon planned to beat him with dirty tricks, he was sorry-out-of-luck because Oliver had learned from the best dirty trickster in the business.

As Reardon rushed forward again, Oliver drew his arm back and hit Reardon hard in the nose, heard a crunch, and this time Reardon

staggered back and fell to one knee.

Another two hits to his face, had the big man falling over backward.

Though he had no doubt that Reardon would kick him in the same situation, Oliver refrained.

Reardon, seeming dazed, yelled out, "Get 'im!" to the two other men in the room, and Oliver turned to the side to face the two footmen. "I would not, if I were you."

He sounded dangerous, even to his own ears, and he felt it, too.

He would demolish anyone that stopped him from getting to Alice.

They exchanged uneasy glances, then looked at Reardon, before studying Oliver once more.

"Get 'im, now!" Reardon roared and as he tried to roll to his feet, Oliver kicked out at him, and shoved him back to the ground.

He faced the other two men again, as they looked at each other, then back at Oliver.

Harry had told him on more than one occasion that perception was everything. If the other man thought he would lose, the fight was already over. "I'm leaving this room now. If you try to stop me, it is not going to go well for you."

His attention on the two men, he walked past Reardon, who kicked out at Oliver and tripped him. He'd underestimated the length of the man's legs!

Oh, how Harry would be disappointed in Oliver, such a rookie move.

When he went down, the other two men jumped him.

Perception, indeed.

Oliver tried to fight his way back to his feet, kicking Reardon several times as the other man tried to gain his feet and the upper hand.

The two footmen held him down and Reardon finally stood, blood dripping down his nose and into his mouth.

The other man smiled, showing bloody teeth, and then he did exactly what Oliver had suspected he'd do. He pulled back his foot and kicked him hard in the side.

Oliver grunted, grabbed hold of Reardon's foot, and yanked it until the other man fell over once more.

" 'Old 'im!" Reardon roared.

When they had him pinned, Reardon stood, and then pulled a knife, knelt down next to Oliver and showed it to him. "The way I see it, Lord Burbidge won't mind at all if I carve a few pretty lines in your face. If 'is boy 'as to 'ave scars for the rest of 'is life, I think you should too. And if I don't wait for 'is permission, then 'e gets to be blameless, and gets a bit of revenge at the same time. I expect he'll be grateful,

don't you?"

Oliver fought harder against the two men holding him, but it only made Reardon laugh. " 'Old 'im still, lad's, as I intend this to be deliberate."

Oliver didn't think the man would kill him, but just in case he held the words that Alice had spoken to him close to his heart.

She'd said she loved him.

If he was actually killed this night, if they both were, perhaps he'd haunt the garden with her.

Determined not to cringe, to show bravery in the face of danger, and to give the man zero satisfaction, Oliver met Reardon's gaze straight on, and then spit in his face.

Reardon wiped his face and gave Oliver a cold smile. "That is going to cost you extra."

He grabbed Oliver's hair, brought the knife up, and leaned in toward Oliver.

Oliver was struggling, pressing away from the knife, when a voice thundered, "What in the name of all that is holy is going on here?"



FOR A MOMENT, Oliver thought it was Harry until he got a better look at the man in the doorway. "Wickham?"

The witch was at least an hour early, and relief that he was, rolled through Oliver. "You're early."

"Did we not say ten o'clock in the garden?"

"We did. I just didn't think it was that late."

"Ah," Wickham said. "Daylight savings time. I can come back, if you'd like?" he said, an amused gleam in his eye.

"No, not at all. Now is a good time," Oliver said, as relief rolled through him.

Wickham laughed. "Introduce me to your friends, won't you?" he said, and his presence seemed to fill the room.

When Wickham's gaze turned toward the footmen, they let go of Oliver, and Oliver quickly scrambled away and stood.

Oliver straightened his clothing. "Wickham, this is Reardon, nefarious bully and a man I've no doubt has destroyed many a life. These other two men are simply toadies without the courage to stand up to him."

He turned to look at them. "Cowards as well."

"Ah," Wickham said again, his gaze going over all three men. "You two, out," he said to the footman, in a tone that dripped disdain.

After a quick glance at Reardon, the two men immediately exited the room, sidling past Wickham who stood in the doorway, and didn't

move out of their way.

“What are you doing playing with these shaggy bags? I thought you were here to rescue a girl.”

Oliver immediately headed toward Wickham and the door. “She’s been taken!”

“Now, just you wait a minute,” Reardon finally found his voice again. “Who do you think you are?” He said to Wickham. “This man is my prisoner, and he’s not going anywhere.”

Wickham raised a hand and Reardon dropped to the ground. “Did you kill him?” Oliver wanted to know, but found he didn’t really care either way.

“No. But there’s a knife right there if you would like to slit his throat and finish the job.”

Oliver was actually tempted, just for a moment, and it made him realize that this place had changed him. “No, let’s go.”

Wickham chuckled, looking genuinely amused, then moved aside so Oliver could exit the room before following Oliver out the door.



ALICE POUNDED ON THE DOOR, and screamed to be let out, her throat stinging and aching.

Her father tried to calm her, “There now, do not wear yourself out. Let’s give it some time, and hope saner heads prevail.”

She turned away from the door. “What do you think Reardon is doing to Oliver?”

Just speaking the words sent her into a coughing fit. He had to be all right. They wouldn’t hurt him, would they? There would be witnesses, consequences, surely they would not harm him.

She placed a hand to her aching throat. She still could not believe that Jonathan had choked her. That he’d intended to abuse her, and mayhap even kill her.

Disbelief rushed through her all over again. Only three years his senior, she’d tended him on many an occasion during childhood.

She’d loved him, taken care of him.

She pounded on the door again, “Help us! We are trapped! Help! Please!”

She coughed again. Why had they taken Oliver away?

She laid her head on the door, as tears trickled down her cheeks.

In the last half-hour, one thing had become crystal clear to her. She loved Oliver. When she’d heard his voice, when he’d come for her, all the doubts that she’d had, all of her insecurities and fears had melted away. And she just couldn’t deny it anymore.

She was done with caution. She was done with trying to do

everything right. To make sure that everything was perfect before she could make a move.

She was ready to let the chips fall where they may.

If she lived through this, she would follow him wherever he led. Wherever he wanted to go, she would be at his side. She loved him.

She slapped her palm against the door once more, as her father came forward and rubbed her back.

Anguish blossomed, in her chest, her heart. Oliver had to be all right. She couldn't contemplate anything else.

She heard a whisper of sound on the other side of the door and started to pound again.

"We're here! Please, let us out!"

She started to cough again, and her father took up her plea. "Please, open the door! We're trapped in here!"

Dapple growled beside them, then barked at the door, and they went quiet.

"There is a difference between trapped and locked in. The two of you are going to pay for what happened to my brother!"

"Jeremy?" Alice croaked out his name. "Please, what are you doing? Let us out!"

"I'm not going to let you out. You're exactly where you're supposed to be. You're going to be very sorry for what happened to Jonathan."

"He would have killed her!" Her father shouted. "He had it coming!"

"Mr. Munro, you have scarred my brother for life! He's upstairs screaming. Cook and Mrs. Quinn are trying to sew his face back together! He will never be the same."

Jeremy sounded coldly angry, unlike the boy she had known and loved his whole life. "And Alice, you are not innocent in all of this! All of this is because of you! Blaming my father, trying to ruin his reputation! You are the one who made Jonathan angry!"

"I am the one who hit him!" Her father yelled through the door. "If I had not she'd be dead right now, and your brother slated for the gallows."

Jeremy laughed, the sound mirthless. "Are you trying to say that you did him a favor? His face is ruined! He will not be able to countenance that!"

"I saved my daughter." Her father slammed his fist against the door. "I'd do it again, a hundred times over to save her. If you want to keep your brother unharmed in future, perhaps you need to look at your part in this! When I arrived, you were just standing there, looking scared, while your brother was murdering my daughter!"

She never heard her father so angry before. She sank against him,

her head on his shoulder, both her arms wrapped around one of his.

They both listened, waited to see what Jeremy would do or say, and finally he said, "Both of you, rot in hell."

As they listened to him walk away, whatever hope she had of being saved, of being able to find Oliver and save him, left as well.

Alice burst into tears.

## Chapter 28

Oliver ran up the stairs, looked around at the partygoers, and when he found Lord Burbidge, headed straight for him.

The man was laughing with his guests and pretending nothing had happened.

When Lord Burbidge saw Oliver coming his direction, he got a slightly panicked look on his face.

Oliver stopped in front of the man, and those in the group looked at him, with expressions ranging from shock and disbelief to amusement.

Oliver had no idea what he looked like, but bloodied and bruised were a good possibility.

"Where is Alice?" he said, his tone harsh, letting Lord Burbidge know he wasn't kidding around.

"Where are your manners, laddie?" Wickham moved to his side, joining the group of men. "I am Lord Wickham, Oliver's benefactor."

Oliver wasn't surprised to see some of the men take a step backward. There was definitely an aura of power about the witch.

Lord Burbidge let out a breath, and looked relieved, probably glad of the distraction. "Lord Wickham, you are most welcome here."

"Thank you. Oliver here is a bright boy, I trust he has been of use to you?"

"Why ... why yes, my lord, he's been very helpful."

"Good, that's good. He's made a lot of money for a lot of people over the years, and I really did not wish to send him here, but apparently, he met a girl. What do you do?" Wickham glanced around the crowd of men, and they all chuckled knowingly, as if they were in on a joke.

Oliver had about had it. "Alice?"

"Oh, yes, that was her name. Alice. I would love to meet her, is she about?"

Lord Burbidge glanced at Oliver, then at Lord Wickham, looking like a man caught out, embarrassed, and not sure what to do about it.

"Hold on just a moment, if you will, and I'll send someone to go and get her."



Lord Burbidge walked away from the group, and Oliver followed him. There was no way he was letting the man out of his sight.

When they rounded the corner Lord Burbidge stopped. "If you must know, she's locked up in the cellar with her father, awaiting my judgment for the fact that my son and heir has been grievously damaged."

"Your son and heir is lucky he's not swinging from a rope for murder. He was strangling Alice when I came upon him."

When Lord Burbidge looked to interrupt, Oliver held up a hand. "I saw this with my own eyes. There is no doubt he would have killed her had we not happened upon him. So if you want me to feel sorry for the fact that he's going to look like the devil that he is, rather than the angel that he is not, take it up with management. Because I don't care."

Lord Burbidge's face crumpled in anger. And Oliver quickly interrupted him once more. "Save it. Where is Alice? If you don't tell me where she is, I am going to make the biggest scene anyone has ever seen in their lives, they will be talking about it for years to come. I will make sure that my rich friends know not to do any business with you, and you will become a pariah. Why? Because you had a hand in this too. Your son would never have done what he did, without the poor influence that you had upon him, chasing after a vulnerable young lady that obviously didn't want anything to do with you."

"I curse you for an ingrate. I didn't have to take you in like I did, give you opportunities. This is how you repay me?"

"You've got ten seconds to lead me to her, or, I am going to make you very, very sorry."

"Fine. But leave your plans for improvement behind."

"Agreed."

Without another word, Burbidge led the way to the cellar door, and down they went.

Oliver wanted to kick himself. She'd been down here the whole time?

They went in the opposite direction that Oliver had come from, and it wasn't long before Oliver heard pounding on the door.

"I'm taking her with me," Oliver said, and hurried toward the noise.

The door was bolted from the outside, no doubt for the purpose of holding whoever Lord Burbidge wanted to hold down here in his quasi-dungeon.

He quickly threw the bolt, and opened the door to see Alice and her father clinging to each other, waiting to see who was on the other side.

Alice's expression of fear cleared away and her mouth parted in

disbelief. "Oh, Oliver, I knew you would come."

Something inside Oliver's chest seemed to loosen. He could not get enough of that from her.

He opened his arms, and Alice flew to them burrowing into his shoulder and locking her arms tight about his waist.

He wrapped his arms around her and she burst into tears. "Are you hurt?" He ran his hands over her arms and down her back. "Are you injured? Has someone harmed you?"

He looked at Mr. Munro and when the man shook his head, Oliver was able to breathe once again.

"Oliver, you need to hear me this time. I love you."

Her voice was hoarse as she made the declaration. "I really, truly, love you. When I thought that you were hurt —"

He heard her swallow hard. "I couldn't bear it. Just because I've had doubts and don't always say or do exactly the right thing at the right times, it doesn't mean that I don't love you, because I do! You are honorable, wonderful, strong, intelligent, and everything that a man should be, when so few are."

Oliver's heart seemed to swell in his chest as relief and happiness flooded through him. "I love you too, Alice. With everything in me."

They were gripping each other tight, and Oliver kissed the top of her head, when he sensed a presence coming up behind him, turned, fully alert, ready for battle.

It was Wickham.

When Alice gasped, Oliver looked down at her, and smiled at her expression.

"Ah, true love," Wickham mocked. "So this is the little lassie, is it?"

Alice's mouth was still open, and Wickham was now preening, and bestowing a wicked smile upon her. "Ready to go?"

"Yes," Oliver said. "Their things are outside."

Alice picked up Dapple, Oliver tucked Alice under his arm, and they followed Wickham up the stairs, through the kitchen, where the maids and the housekeeper were busy pouring drinks and looking terrified.

Alice stopped. "I'm leaving now," she said, and looked around the room.

Cook came down the stairs, her apron stained with blood, and she glanced around at all of them. She opened her mouth as if to say something, stopped, then tried again. "God be with you, child," she finally said, her voice tight, tears welling in her eyes.

And then all of them watched as Wickham led them out the kitchen door, and into the night.

They walked through some of the guests, still outside having fun,

laughing and playing games, and they ignored them all, walking directly to the Munro cabin.

Their possessions were still scattered about. They carefully collected them all, and when they were ready, stood in a ragtag group, as Wickham looked at them with amusement. "Now, are you ready to go home?"

Oliver, with his arm tightly around Alice, gestured Mr. Munro forward to join them. "It'll be the three of us."

"And the dog!" Alice said.

Wickham snorted. "That is going to cost you extra, laddie," he said, and then with a wave of his hand, he took them home.

## Chapter 29

*A* whirlwind later, they fell to the ground.

Three of them did, anyway, Wickham was still on his feet.

There was a shout, and Oliver was reaching for Alice, even as he scanned for an attack.

And attacked he was. He was wrenched to his feet, and Harry, looking worried and upset, held him by the back of his vest shirt, and gave him a shake. "Oliver, are you all right?" He gave him another shake. "Where have you been? I told you! Didn't I tell you? This is what you get for dealing with a male witch!"

Oliver, so happy to see Harry, broke into a huge grin. "Harry!" He glanced past him to see a worried looking Daphne, hurrying down the grass covered slope.

He glanced around and recognized Lady Maren's garden, completely different from the one in the past that he'd grown used to.

Alice was sitting up, clutching Dapple. Her father, sitting on the ground, put an arm around her and drew her close.

They were looking around them, with shocked expressions on their faces. They recognized the house, but the gardens were different, and Mr. Munro's house was gone. Alice, eyes wide, clung to her father. Her father was gaping too, and Oliver went to them. "Don't worry, these are my friends. We'll talk about this."

Harry, brushing Oliver off, and then grasping his face and looking at his half-swollen eye made a tsk tsk noise. "It looks like you got into a bit of a scrum, but you'll be all right."

Harry smiled, grasped him by the shoulders, and gave him a shake. "You look good, lad. You look like you've had an adventure, and you're none the worse for wear for it. Daphne, didn't I tell you he'd be all right?"

Daphne snorted. "Yes, Harry, that's exactly what you said." She reached them, and threw herself into Oliver's arms. "You're so late. We didn't know where you were, and we were getting very worried."

"It's good to see you all again," Oliver said, stepping back. He reached down, helped Alice to her feet, and then her father as well.

Chatterton was there, and Lord and Lady Maren, who had come

down the hill at a much slower pace, finally arrived. He could see his mother on the veranda with Haversack at her side.

Oliver gave everyone a wide smile. "Everyone, this is Alice Munro, and her father George."

"Oh!" Lady Maren clasped her hands together and looked at the two with an expression of pure happiness on her face. "Didn't I tell you, husband, that we had a ghost in our garden? And now she's here, and she's brought her father with her."

"Oh, my dear," Lady Maren came forward, and held her arms out to Alice, who had such a strange look on her face, that it gave Oliver pause.

With a look of awe, shock, and disbelief on Alice's face, she slowly walked forward, "I ... I remember you," Alice said, and burst into tears, then threw herself into Lady Maren's arms.



AT THE SIGHT of Lady Maren, memories rushed through Alice. Days, weeks, decades, centuries.

She glanced over at the garden, her prison, sanctuary, and home.

She'd died there eons ago, she remembered it all.

She'd been attacked and, half-dead, had been carried to the garden where her murderer, with help from his brother, had finished the job and buried her. She'd stayed there, among the roses, and existed, sometimes disappearing, other times very aware of her situation.

She'd been a ghost.

Her gaze moved to Harry. She remembered meeting him, asking for his help. He'd asked a lady for her hand in marriage, and there she was now, at his side.

And, Oliver had been there, too.

Oliver, he'd ... he'd come to find her, rescued her, and brought her forward in time. He'd come back and saved her.

She glanced at Wickham, who was watching her, studying her every expression with a slight smile on his face, as if he knew her every thought.

And there was her father, who hadn't lasted long after her death, had wasted away and died within the year, leaving her alone.

A sob broke from her and she ran to him and buried her face in his shoulder, as she cried.

He was here, with her, alive, and she could feel his heart beating. The grief she'd felt at the years without him welled up, and she sobbed as he patted her on the back and held her close.

"Alice?"

It was Oliver, and she kept her face hidden against her father,

suddenly worried that she looked a mess, especially when compared to the beautiful Daphne. She'd recognized the name of the woman that Oliver had hoped to marry.

Oliver looked slightly at a loss. "Are you all right?"

"All right?" she asked.

"What I mean is, are you going to stay calm and collected about all of this, or do you need to run screaming into the night?"

At the image of it, she giggled, a slightly hysterical sound. She was going to have to tell him that she remembered everything. She remembered the centuries, and she remembered him.

She eased out of her father's arms so she could look at Oliver.

No, she wasn't going to run screaming into the night, and the look on his face steadied her. "I don't believe I will."

He nodded and smiled. "That's my girl."

And she was.

She suddenly chuckled, because what did it matter what she looked like. She was here, she was alive, and it was because of Oliver. He'd said that he loved her, and then shown her in the most definite way possible.

"Oliver, I do need something."

Oliver looked suddenly fierce. "Anything you want, anything at all. Just tell me and I'll make sure you have it."

What did she want? Love for this man flooded her. He was looking at her like she hung the moon and stars again. She raised her hands and he was quick to clasp them. "You. I just need you."

His hands tightened on hers. "Are you sure? You can have anything you want. Be anything you want. I'll make sure you have any opportunity you could wish for."

She thought of his proposals, and decided it was her turn. Her father, Oliver, Harry, Daphne, the Maren's; they were all hovering, but it still felt like the perfect moment. Feeling both brave and happy, she smiled. "Oliver. Will you marry me?"

He let out a breath. "Yes, my love. Yes, I'll marry you."

"You don't want to think about it?" she teased.

Looking stunned, he shook his head.

"Dearest Oliver," she said, and pulled her hand from his so she could lift her hands to his cheeks. The way he'd wooed her with gentle words and sweet actions meant the world to her.

The way he'd earned her trust and been a gentleman, the way he'd fought for her, the way he'd risk his life, and along with her father, had saved her, with no thought or care for what might befall him.

She was having a hard time catching her breath, as she looked into his worried brown eyes, the kindest, gentlest, and — she couldn't forget his kisses — most passionate man she'd ever met.

He was looking so uncertain, unsure, and she loved him for it.

For everything.

She loved him so much, and tears welled in her eyes as she melted into his arms.

No matter where she was, no matter the century, she would be all right, as long as she was with Oliver.

She tilted her face to his, and after one long searching glance, he kissed her, and she was home.



THE KISS OLIVER gave Alice was one of claiming.

She was his.

He'd won this woman, and not with the power of his bank account, but by right and by might.

Right because he'd won her trust. He'd been patient, kind, and had proven himself.

And by might, because he fought for her and won.

As their friends started to clap, Oliver broke off the kiss and smiled down at Alice.

Whether Harry knew it or not, this was what he'd been trying to teach him. He'd been instructing him on more than fighting. He'd been showing him how to grow into a man that a woman would want, love, lean on, and desire.

She rubbed at his face. Dirt or bruising? He must look terrible, at his very worst. Dirty, bruised, and for all she knew poor, and she was still planning to marry him.

Smiling, Oliver kept one arm around Alice, and then held out a hand to George.

George took his hand and shook it. "I can see I should've listened more closely when you told me about time travel."

Oliver grinned at him as George gave Wickham a sidelong glance.

Wickham laughed. "I've things tae say tae ye, laddie. I'll be expecting payment as promised?"

As if Oliver would stiff the man after everything he'd done. He grinned. As if he'd dare. "You can count on it," Oliver said, and gave Alice another squeeze. The man would have a hefty tip coming his way, as well.

Wickham gave him a nod. "I've places tae go. If anyone asks, I had to take care of something. Tis important." He looked at Oliver, and then at Harry as if trying to impress the importance of the message they might need to pass along.

When they both nodded, he turned and headed to the garden. Once he reached the arbor, he ducked inside, and disappeared.

After a moment of silence, Lady Maren said, "Is the man interested in flowers?"

At that, everyone chuckled.

As Oliver held Alice close, her arm closed around his waist and Oliver kissed the top of her head. He looked back at his friends who were smiling, talking, and introducing themselves to George and Alice.

Chatterton had joined them and was the picture of charm as he bowed over Alice's hand, making her blush.

Lord Maren, looking serious and concerned, took her hand next, bowing over it. "Your servant, my dear."

"I bet you're starving!" Lady Maren said brightly. "If everyone will run up to the house, I've got food and drink."

"Brilliant," Oliver said with a smile.

"What are we waiting for?" Harry said, and, taking Daphne's hand, led the way.

As a group they moved up the slope and Oliver, with his arm around Alice, brought up the rear. "That's my mother up there waiting for us. I can't wait for you to meet her."

"I'd like that," Alice said softly.

He swallowed against the emotion tightening his throat. He'd always been blessed with much. And so much of it had been by accident of birth.

His family, his upbringing, the schools he'd attended, his intelligence. He'd worked hard, yes, but much of what he had, he'd taken for granted.

Now, he'd gotten a taste for how others lived, and felt improved for it. And that, as well, had been a lucky opportunity.

Because he had it all: friends, family, the love of his life.

Oliver's throat tightened as, with his arm around Alice, he followed everyone up to the house.

Alice had told him once that she drew bad luck to herself.

Well, he drew good luck. And he was going to share every bit of it with her. If he had his way, she was going to feel like the luckiest girl in the world.



## Epilogue 1

Almost two weeks later

This wasn't how Oliver had envisioned his bachelor party.

"I mean it, Harry, don't do it! Do not do it! We're both getting married tomorrow! The girls will kill us! Think about what Daphne will have to say to you!"

Harry wavered for just the slightest moment, but a call from his friend, Sweeney, had him wading into the fight.

If Oliver hadn't seen the momentary glee on his friend's face, he might have thought that Harry was doing this out of friendship and camaraderie and whatever the heck else went through Harry's head in times of stress.

But no, this was exactly Harry's cup of tea, and Oliver supposed if he didn't join in as well, he'd later wonder if he was a coward and second-guess himself.

He took a moment to watch Sweeney, and Harry hadn't been wrong. The man could not only fight, he was brilliant! Hitting, gouging, hammering his opponents into submission, all the while making it look easy, like he was performing a dance.

Oliver took a deep breath, blew it out, and then headed in to join Harry in the fight that had broken out in the warehouse.

It didn't take long for one of the crazy men to engage Oliver, and though a well timed punch ended up splitting his lip, he still thought he was comporting himself well, punching the man three times in the face in quick succession, until he staggered back, and decided to find easier prey.

Whistles were blown, shouts of *police, run*, filled the room, and men started to scramble, running toward the different exits in the warehouse.

Harry was quick to find him, and the two of them followed Sweeney out one of the doors.

They ran down an alleyway, turned down another, and eventually ended up on a main street.

Harry was laughing, Sweeney had that look on his face again, the one that said he knew far too much about far too many things, and Oliver? Well, Oliver was just wondering what he was doing here.

Sweeney looked back and clapped Oliver on the shoulder. "What you did there, hitting the man in the face the way you did. Well

done.”

“What about me?” Harry sounded indignant. “Did ye no’ see the behemoth I was fighting?”

Sweeney laughed. “I did indeed, but I never doubted you for a second.”

Meaning what? Oliver made a scoffing noise. That he’d doubted Oliver?

As the three of them turned down yet another street, Harry was quick to bring up the subject on his mind once more. “Can ye not stay just one more day? The wedding is tomorrow, and you haven’t met Daphne yet.”

“I’m not sure that I wish tae. Any woman that’s willing tae take ye on, must be a harridan.”

Harry laughed, seeming to take the man’s comment as a compliment. He doubted that Daphne would feel the same.

“One more day?” Harry wheedled.

“I’d love to be there, you know I would, but I’ve arranged passage for tonight.”

Passage, as in Sweeney had paid someone to sneak him aboard a ship heading for America. He was planning to stowaway.

Oliver had offered to help him get some identification, and even pay for the flight, but Sweeney had been aghast. “Pay for it? I’ve got two hands, haven’t I? Besides, I already have it worked out.”

His idea of working it out turned out to be fighting for money, and then skulking around down at the docks and paying a man to sneak him aboard a ship headed for New York.

“You know, we have a lot of good actors here in the UK,” Oliver said, trying once again to convince the man to stay.

“I’m headed for Broadway, laddie, and I’ll not be talked out of it.”

Harry gave Oliver a grateful look that said he appreciated him for at least trying.

Oliver finally decided that Sweeney just had an idea stuck in his head from another time and another place, and there was no swaying him.

He dabbed at the cut on his mouth, and realized that the split lip might just be a problem on his honeymoon, one he’d have preferred not to worry about.

He should have played the cowardice card, and stood back.

A glance at Harry in an overhead light, made him realize it could’ve been worse. One of Harry’s eyes looked to be swelling closed, and he could just imagine what Daphne was going to say about that.

They better get some ice on it as quickly as possible, or their wedding photos might not turn out the way she’d hoped.

His friends were talking in Gaelic now, giving Oliver time to think

about his favorite subject.

Alice.

Tomorrow she'd be his bride, and he could not wait. He was counting down the minutes until she was his.

She'd stayed with Lord and Lady Maren.

She'd been shocked when he'd suggested living at his place until the wedding. She had taken Lady Maren up on her offer, and had lived at the manor house while she and Daphne planned the wedding.

The two girls had taken to each other like a house on fire, and in fact, everyone had taken to Alice.

Which meant that it was difficult to get her to himself.

But after tomorrow? He'd have her in his home, in his life, and in his bed.

"What's put that smile on your face?" Sweeney asked.

"I'm getting married tomorrow," Oliver drawled. "What do you think has me smiling?"

The other two men laughed.

"You and me both lad," Harry said. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but I cannae wait to move out of your house."

Oliver admitted to himself that he would miss Harry, but Alice was more than a satisfactory substitute.

Besides, they'd still be working together every day, and he had no doubt there would be a lot of double dating in the future.

After the honeymoon period was over, of course.

Harry and Daphne were driving to Alderney, to honeymoon in the sun, but Oliver was planning to stay home at his estate.

He didn't want to throw too much at Alice at once.

In the two weeks since she'd been back, she'd only gone to London one time, and had been quite overwhelmed by the city.

She liked his home though.

Oliver had been a little nervous to take Alice to his house.

He hadn't exactly explained certain things to her, and he'd hoped that she wouldn't hold it against him.

He was rich, hadn't told her, and wasn't sure how she would react. He'd been worried that she would feel he'd somehow lied to her.

He'd taken Alice and her father to his home in the limousine.

As they had driven through the city, they'd been shocked and amazed by the size of it.

When they pulled up to Oliver's house, they had thought it was his place of employment, and that he worked for another rich man.

He admitted that it was his.

Alice turned and looked at him for a long moment, and then she said, "I'm marrying a rich man?"

"Yes," he'd told her. "Sorry about that."

She'd looked around the place, and when she'd found the library, she'd finally smiled at him, chuckled, and said, "I suppose I'll have to manage."

He'd laughed with relief.

Chatterton had dropped them off for a couple of hours, and Alice had yet to return. She swore if she did, her virtue was in danger, which to be fair, it was.

The two of them were like magnets, and whenever they were alone, well, he'd think about that later.

Tomorrow night, in fact.

They walked Sweeney down to the docks, and under the lights, Harry's eye looked worse than ever, though Sweeney didn't have so much as a mark on his face.

Harry had once told him that it was impossible to defeat Sweeney in a fight.

After watching him tonight, Harry believed him.

"Here we are lads. I thank ye for the company, but I'll go the rest of the way on my own."

Oliver looked down the dark walkway, and wondered at the other man's sanity.

Harry grasped Sweeney's forearm. "Goodbye, for now."

"For now," Sweeney said.

"Are ye sure ye doonae wish tae purchase a cell phone, so ye can call me if anything goes wrong?"

Sweeney grinned. "What could possibly go wrong?"

Harry chuckled. "Well, since you'll be in America, you'll probably run into Calum. You still have my number memorized? You can give it to him?"

Sweeney rattled off Harry's phone number.

Harry looked down, and blew out a breath.

They watched Sweeney walk away, and then the two of them turned to walk back the way they'd come.

Oliver hoped no one was going to jump them on their way out.

They were already damaged enough. Alice would probably fuss over his split lip, but Daphne was gonna tear Harry a new one when she got a look at his swollen eye.

He realized Harry was quiet, unlike his normal self, and Oliver felt some real sympathy for Harry.

"The world is a much smaller place than it used to be," Oliver said. "I'm sure you'll hear from him soon. Maybe he'll decide America's not for him, and come back sooner rather than later."

Harry shook his head. "You don't know Sweeney. Once he's got something in his head, it's impossible to get it out."

"Well, you can always go visit him as well."

Harry looked skeptical. "I don't imagine it would be easy to get Daphne to stowaway on a ship."

"You could fly," Oliver said dryly.

He looked at Oliver, incredulous. "Just because I can stand by those windows in your office building, doesn't mean I'm ready to take to the skies in a tube made of tin."

Oliver grinned. "Well, if you ever talk Daphne into it, perhaps you could dress her as a boy, and stowaway."

Harry nodded, as if the idea had merit.

"Or you could just buy a ticket."

Harry snorted.

They caught a taxi, and went back to Oliver's place.

His lip stung when he smiled.

Happiness flooded Oliver once more, as it did every time he thought of Alice.

He didn't like being separated from her, and after tomorrow, he'd never have to be again.

He wanted her installed in his home, in his life, and in his bed.

He was quite looking forward to it.

They arrived at Oliver's place, punched in the code on the security gate, walked up to the mansion and went inside.

"You know, we are in so much trouble," Oliver said, dabbing at the cut on his lip.

"You mean, I am," Harry said. His eye was already swollen shut, and they needed to get some ice on it before it closed. "Daphne's going to take one look at me and refuse to marry me on the morrow."

"Maybe the swelling will go down before pictures tomorrow morning?"

Harry walked over to a fancy gilt mirror and studied his face.

"Daphne's going to kill me."

"She just might."

Tomorrow, Harry would be gone, and Alice would be living here.

As much as he hated to lose his friend, he couldn't wait to marry Alice.

He slapped Harry on the back and said, "Put some ice on it. Let's get cleaned up. We're getting married tomorrow."

## Epilogue 2

The next day

“Are you scared?” Daphne asked the question, with a quaver in her own voice, so Alice knew which of them was more fearful.

Over the last two weeks, Harry was at turns exuberant, and then worried that Daphne was going to change her mind, get away and be lost to him forever. Alice, seeing how close the two of them were, had scoffed at the notion.

But the other girl, beautiful in a white wedding gown, definitely looked panic-stricken at the moment, and so Alice moved forward, the white silk of her wedding gown swishing as she moved to take the other girl’s hands.

“No. Oliver is the love of my life, and I’m lucky to be marrying him.”

Daphne’s green eyes studied her. “You’re so calm. You’ve been through so much to get here. Why are you the one that is so calm?”

Alice wondered if Harry’s excitability was wearing off on the normally calm and collected Daphne. “Take a breath.”

When Daphne took a breath, and released it slowly, Alice squeezed her hands and smiled.

They stood in Lord and Lady Maren’s great room as they waited for the wedding to start.

It was to be a double wedding, and Daphne had become quite dear to her during the planning thereof. The other woman had been a rock during the last two weeks, planning, organizing, and making sure everything would be finished on time.

Oliver had practically lived there during the two weeks of preparation, and she hadn’t doubted for a moment that he was meant for her.

He told her that people saw him as logical and straightforward, but with her he was passionate and emotional, and she loved it, the feeling of it, of him, close to her heart.

He was in love with her, and she him, and that certainty filled her with happiness.

They would live in London, and Alice had already visited the home which she and Oliver would take up residence in after they were married.

The fact that she was to marry such a rich man had given her



pause, but she loved Oliver with all her heart.

She'd been a ghost in the garden for a long time, and now she'd figure out how to be a wife. It was time for a new adventure.

Her father appeared in the doorway. He was to walk both brides down the aisle this day, and he looked amazing in a black suit and tie and shiny black shoes.

He'd had his hair cut and his beard trimmed and he looked wonderful.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Alice looked encouragingly at Daphne, and the other girl swallowed hard and nodded.

The wedding had been planned by professionals, and they had spared no expense.

They were to be married to the side of the garden, not far from the cottage that Lady Maren was building for her father.

A large white tent had been set up, and white chairs were within, leaving plenty of room for her father to walk them both up the aisle.

After the wedding, there was to be food and dancing.

Her father held the door and Daphne went first, then Alice. Both of them took one of her father's arms, then walked down the stairs together, and started across the manicured lawn.

When they made it to the tent, and walked up the aisle between the chairs, she could see Oliver, looking pleased and smiling.

It was good they were getting married this day, because his kisses were becoming ever more fervent, and Alice was having a difficult time parting from him when he left at the end of every night.

The things he'd been saying to her recently ... about having her in his bed, about what he'd do to her once he had her there, well, she suddenly had to think on something else, as she didn't want to walk red-faced up the aisle.

She glanced at Harry, who looked tense, and perhaps even disbelieving, as his gaze focused on his bride walking toward him.

Her father handed her over to Oliver, then Daphne to Harry, and then stepped back to take the seat of honor next to Oliver's mother, who had Dapple on a leash.

"Are you ready?" Oliver asked.

Alice smiled and when she gazed into Oliver's eyes, she thought she would drown in the love she saw there.

How had she lived without him for all those dark years? They might've been easier, knowing he was in her future, but as it was, she'd barely existed.

And now, here she was, surrounded by family, friends, and life.

She was happier than she'd ever been, or ever thought possible.

And all because Oliver had come for her.

“I’m ready.”

Standing near her father’s garden, with a man who looked at her like she’d hung the moon and the stars, she exchanged vows before family, friends, and before God.

As Oliver kissed her, a lover’s kiss that had her blushing and melting for him, all seemed exactly right in her world.

Then Harry whooped loudly, and Oliver broke off the kiss, as everyone started to laugh.

She turned and smiled at the crowd of well-wishers, most of whom she didn’t know. She’d been so lonely, for so long, that it was a joy to be seen.

She gripped Oliver’s hand as they walked back down the aisle.

She smiled at her father, and then glanced at the garden behind him.

Somehow, it seemed appropriate that her new life should start here, so near her father’s garden.

## Author note

Dear Reader,

I outline my stories with my good friend, Heather Horrocks. (Thanks, girl, for the fun, and often hilarious, plotting days!)

But when I'm writing, the story often takes me places I had no intention of going and I just sort of go along for the ride.

One of the reasons I love to write time travel romance is that the stories are automatic fish out of water stories, my very favorite kind.

The characters are placed in unfamiliar situations and comedy ensues. So, basically, the story is inherently funny before it even gets started.

My characters are usually pretty mouthy, and so their dialogue just shows up full-blown, and I quickly write it down.

Alice and Oliver? Both of them were shy, still finding themselves, and neither of them had a dang thing to say!

Believe me, I was more surprised than anyone when Oliver was the more outgoing of the two!

Still, I'm just here to write it down.

To me, the story seemed awfully dark in places, and as I followed the characters, I was getting pretty scared about what would happen to Alice.

I determined several times to start over, and lighten it up, however, I kept falling back into Oliver and Alice's journey, and in doing so, discovered two very sweet individuals.

Even with all of the serious conflict that they faced, I hope that you found the story light enough, and an enjoyable read.

I'm not the best when it comes to keeping deadlines, and I want to thank everyone for their patience in waiting for this story. You readers are the reason that I keep doing this, and I'm very, very grateful to all of you for continuing to read and enjoy the stories.

Sweeney is next, and that man doesn't have a shy bone in his body! He's been floating around in my head for far too long, and I'm excited to write his story.

{{Hugs}} to you all, and happy reading!



## New releases

For new releases, sign up for my newsletter at [www.DianeDarcy.com](http://www.DianeDarcy.com) to be notified when the next story is out.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this book. If you liked it, please take a few minutes to review. Even a quick, *it was good*, helps. (If you are unsure how to leave a review, go to the purchase page, and next to the stars, click on the word *ratings*, then scroll down until you see a box that reads *customer review*.)

If you're interested in future works, please follow me on [Facebook](#), or join my [mailing list](#).

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## About the Author

Again, I want to say thank you to everyone who takes the time to read my books.

I'm from Utah, I love to write, and while I don't always know where the story is going, I can promise it will be a lively journey, hopefully funny, and most likely romantic. I love a good happily ever after.

I also love to hear from readers! Please drop me a note at: [booksbydianedarcy@gmail.com](mailto:booksbydianedarcy@gmail.com)

Thanks again for reading Alice. I'd love to hear your thoughts about this novel (or any others you've read).

Warm Regards,  
*Diane Darcy*

